

Examiners' Report Summer 2009

iGCSE

iGCSE English Language (4355)

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Summer 2009

Publications Code UG021465

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Section A: Reading

Questions 1-6

For Section A the candidates study a passage about a young girl from Trinidad who experiences her first British winter. The passage proved to be accessible to almost all candidates, with very few experiencing any difficulties in reading comprehension. The lower mark tariff questions provided a useful lead into the passage and most candidates were able to make a response and be awarded some marks. For question 3 and other such questions candidates are advised to note the line references they are to work within. The mark scheme is constructed in such a way that examiners will reward the features found within the specified passage, but are unable to reward any material from outside the designated section. Question 4 was a question that tested inferential skills and required only a brief response to achieve both marks. Candidates should be advised that not all of the answers to the passage can be found directly in the words of the passage and there are times when candidates have to demonstrate other reading skills such as inference. Question 5 asked about how the writer's feelings about snow differed from her feelings about fog and other kinds of weather. Some candidates did not pick up full marks here because they only addressed one part of the question. The key discriminator, as in previous papers, was the focus on the writer's technique in question 6. Some candidates were able to explain the impact of the writer's use of a range of techniques such as figurative language, use of contrasts and use of adjectives and adjectival phrases. Other answers lacked range and whilst recognising some elements of mood were unable to explain how certain moods had been created.

Section B: Reading and Writing

Question 7

Section B was based upon the pre-prepared text from the Edexcel Anthology, Harriet Tubman. Almost all candidates seemed to have knowledge of the text and were able to recognise some elements of difficulty that Harriet Tubman faced in her life. Stronger responses recognised the overarching difficulty of slavery itself, and some explored the connotations of words and concepts such as "rented", when she was rented out as a young child. The bullet points are there to help focus candidates and to support them in constructing their response. However, candidates must ensure that they are answering the central question and not responding to the bullet points in a disassociated manner. Better answers did this whilst less successful responses only partially addressed the bullet points or narrated aspects of the writer's life.

Question 8

The writing task in Section B asked candidates to write about someone who has overcome difficulties in life. This was an accessible task for all with many writing about parents and other relatives who had overcome tribulations to become successful. Stronger answers communicated effectively and recognised the need to explain rather than just narrate events. Candidates would do well to remember the constituent parts of the writing mark scheme: effectiveness of communication, organisation and spelling, punctuation and grammar. Some writers ensured that they demonstrated key skills in these areas whilst less successful responses were sometimes brief and sometimes lacking in organisation and coherence.

Section C: Writing

Question 9

Candidates were engaged by the notion of having to choose five things to take if they had to leave their house at very short notice. The range was wide, though mobile phones and other technologies were popular choices. Almost all candidates were able to write in response to this task and it produced some engaging and sensitive responses. The better ones were those that did not assume a knowledge that the writer did not have and were able to explore motivation, emotional connection and practical choice of objects to take. These answers were able to control paragraphing and text structure and to communicate clearly and accurately. Less successful responses were often brief and tended to list items with little explanation or justification.

Section A: Reading

Questions 1-4

The passage studied in Section A was the true story of a Victorian lifeboat rescue of two ships on the same day. The passage proved to be accessible to almost all candidates, with very few experiencing any difficulties in reading comprehension and most engaging in the exciting story of man struggling against the elements. Questions 1 and 2 provided a useful lead into the passage with Question 1 being done well by almost all candidates. Most candidates scored well on Question 2 with only a few choosing to present words or phrases that were not about rowing the lifeboat but were about the preparations prior to setting off. The character of Henry Blogg proved to be sufficiently well-drawn and commanding a figure that many candidates scored highly on Question 3. Those who scored less than full marks did so because their answers lacked sufficient scope and range. Once again the key discriminator is the higher mark tariff question 4 and its focus on the writer's technique. In this instance candidates were asked to focus upon how the writer creates a sense of danger and growing excitement. Bullet points offered further support for structuring an answer by focusing candidates upon the opening of the passage, the weather and the challenges faced. Less successful responses were often limited to a small number of points, some not acknowledging that there were two rescues in the passage and the relationship between the two being very important in the creation of excitement and danger. Some candidates were able to explain how the opening, with its use of superlatives, suggests a story of near mythical proportions. The use of a range of techniques, particularly personification of the weather, "The North Sea in its worst mood", and the extended metaphor of warfare and boxing as Henry Blogg battles against the sea were recognised and commented upon by many candidates. Some candidates recognised the part played by paragraphing and variety in sentence length as having a role to play in the creation of danger and excitement.

Section B: Reading and Writing

Question 5

Section B was based upon the pre-prepared text from the Edexcel Anthology, Chinese Cinderella and focused upon the writer's experience of fear and joy. Almost all candidates seemed to have a sound knowledge of the text and the writer's experience. Less successful responses were often narratives that did not focus upon the question, or did not have a sufficient grasp of how the writer was sharing her feelings with the reader. Some less successful answers identified relevant quotations but linked them together with little or no commentary, assuming that the quotations themselves would explain the craft of the writer. Stronger responses were those that were able to focus upon the language and the techniques used, recognising the manner in which sometimes both emotions exist simultaneously, such as her entrance into the "holy of holies". Better answers showed a sound analysis of language recognising the intended effect of consecutive rhetorical questions and the use of metaphor.

Question 6

The writing task in Section B asked candidates to, "Describe what you want in your life and how you aim to achieve it." This was accessible to all candidates with almost all candidates articulating some sense of aim or ambition, albeit that less successful responses were often incomplete, communicating at a basic level that

showed little awareness of the reader or the intended purpose of the writing. Better responses wrote with a skilful command of language and technique that was at once fully engaging and sophisticated in its control.

Section C: Writing

Question 7

Almost all candidates were able to express a view about their own lives and whether or not things will get better or worse in the future. Many responses regarded the impact of technology in their lives as being significantly different to those of their parents and grandparents and many approached the question of the future as one about man's impact upon his environment. Less successful responses were often brief and tended to be limited in their ability to clearly express likes and dislikes, often failing to recognise the needs of the reader and assuming a shared knowledge of their lives that was not evident to the reader. Less successful responses were often lacking in paragraphing and a sense of structure across a piece of writing. In contrast more able responses were able to demonstrate an understanding of how to create and sustain textual cohesion, writing in a manner that was consistently accurate and that was sharply focused upon the needs of the reader.

Question 1: Reading

The overall level of response was very sound and suggested that candidates had been well prepared on this text and had enjoyed studying it.

The relative strength of answers very largely depended on the degree to which candidates focused on the question, and analysed and evaluated the presentation of the family relationships. The level of textual referencing and the effectiveness, with which candidates addressed and commented on the writer's use of language, were also key discriminators.

The least successful answers were those which summarised or paraphrased the plot, perhaps making occasional references to family relationships, and sometimes incorporating pre-learnt, generic notes, particularly on linguistic features. Candidates from one centre used exactly the same pre-taught introduction to the story, an approach which inevitably limits attainment, at both ends of the ability spectrum. Moving up the scale of attainment were those candidates who tended to describe, rather than analyse, the relationships and to comment, in generalised terms, on the writer's use of language; some also took (or adapted) the question to refer to the ways in which the reader was made to be interested in the story, rather than to the presentation of close relationships. Another form of irrelevance involved writing about the relationships in terms of how much the reader learnt about them.

At the top end of the attainment range there were some fascinating interpretations of the power struggle within the family, with some excellent analyses of the complexities and ironies in relationships, particularly those of father and Swami, and husband and wife. There were some alternative approaches. Some candidates questioned whether the relationships were actually close and argued that the writer was deliberately presenting a dysfunctional family. The weakest of these criticised him because he had failed to present close relationships. Examiners are trained and instructed to assess answers positively on their merits and not to have preconceptions of what is appropriate or not, but the degree of relevance will shade the assessment.

This is particularly true of the use of the bullet points. These are designed to suggest aspects of the passage that the candidate may most usefully explore in addressing the question. Some candidates, however, use them as subsidiary questions. The latter approach works least well for the final bullet point "the writer's use of words and phrases and techniques." As noted already, some candidates regurgitated a generic list of linguistic features, sometimes supported by quotations, but usually having no bearing on the actual question. Better approaches integrated comments on language from the beginning and often in relation to other bullet points. For instance one candidate wrote: 'The father is presented from the beginning as ashamed of Swami; we are told he "sneered" at him. The verb helps to express how Swami is not taken seriously by his father'. Another wrote of the relationship between Swami and his grandmother "The emotive vocabulary "groaned in despair" and the repetition of "desperate" brings out Swami's dependence on his grandmother, whilst the grandmother's colloquial, childish language ("sleepy") shows how she cares for him." These examples demonstrate an approach which benefits from leading directly into the question

and consequently the mark scheme, whereas the listing approach is of much more limited relevance and hence value.

With reference to the other bullet points, the level of understanding was reflected in the closeness of the candidate's reading, which, at best, uncovered ambiguity and found contradictions. Some contrasted the father's threatening to make his son "the laughing stock of your school" with his also allowing him to keep the door of his study open; one candidate wrote that, though husband and wife "do not seem to get on", the fact that "she was rocking a cradle showed they were physically close."

In brief the best answers interrogated the presentation of the relationships with a focus on the language from the outset, and were able to convey the writer's essentially comic purpose.

Question 2: Writing

Though questions were not equally popular, significant numbers of candidates answered each of them.

2 (a)

This was the least popular question but it produced some of the best answers. Advice was given copiously, especially with regard to teenagers, though some wrote with convincing authority about younger children and babies. Most candidates gave their advice clearly, both in terms of careful expression and a logical structure.

The overall quality of responses was usually defined by the candidate's grasp of context. An answer which showed an initial sense of audience - "Parenting. The word that brings tears of joy to some but tears of dread to others" - was much more likely to be successful than one which began "I am going to write a magazine article about parenting."

Less successful candidates lost sight of the main purpose and focused on their own experiences and views, rather than giving advice which was directed at, and would benefit the reader. The most successful responses showed a strong awareness of purpose, engaging the reader's interest by a lively, journalistic style and adopting a humorous or (at the very top end) subtly ironic tone.

Some candidates used sub headings to give the piece more journalistic authenticity and impact. These usually worked well, but drawing columns in an examination booklet is not advisable, as it is difficult to write legibly in a cramped space. It should be noted also that the mark schemes relate only to the assessment objectives for English Language; no marks can be given for the use of graphics or typographical features.

2 (b)

This was the most popular question and stimulated some very interesting responses. Though there were significant differences of opinion, often reflecting the individual background and experience of the candidate, there was common agreement on the importance of central goals (for example effective study, good family and social relationships), discipline, though there was much disagreement about methods.

Most candidates argued in favour of the types of education they were most accustomed to. It was noticeable that there were a significant number of

candidates who were taking the examination as home based students, most of whom were very strongly in favour of this system of education.

Answers to this question were particularly dense in terms of points and detail, and ideas were often developed at considerable length. The biggest challenges for candidates were those of balance and structure. Less successful candidates struggled to assimilate ideas and experience and convey them in a cohesive form. The most successful answers used anecdote to illustrate the analytical points that were being made and came to a definite conclusion, which conveyed a clear preference, after a balanced discussion.

2 (c)

This question was attempted by about one third of the candidature.

Candidates wrote about a variety of images, not all of which were photographic, and there was a wide range of responses.

The least successful were narrative approaches, which were more strongly based on a prepared story than the chosen picture, which was mentioned at the beginning and then (mostly) forgotten. These were further weakened by a lack of emphasis on the expression of thoughts and feelings.

Candidates, who tried to answer the question appropriately, achieved a mixed level of success. Many pieces were extremely well expressed and reflected, as one examiner put it "a mind-bogglingly diverse experience of life." Structure again, however, was a problem. Candidates knew how to begin their accounts, but were less able to sustain them, so there was a tendency to repeat and to effuse. The most typical responses of this kind were gushingly emotional stories, for instance based on the photo of an unbelievably perfect and beautiful lover who had died (young) in dramatic and tragic circumstances. These were often well expressed but lacked the sharpness of the observations of candidates who were clearly writing from experience and gave a more acute sense of reality; for instance, reflecting on the photograph of a dead relative (usually an uncle or a grand parent), or of a family, before a divorce. This approach, however, also posed problems if the emotion was too raw. Other approaches suggested a known template - the empty picture to be filled, a jigsaw puzzle to be completed - and produced a mixed response in terms of consistency of expression. Perhaps the best responses were those which were light hearted and maintained a focus on the thoughts and feelings evoked by the picture from start to finish.

Overall the writing responses underlined the importance of planning, even of a rudimentary kind. Responses which are prefaced with notes, or a plan of some kind, tend to have more sense of purpose and a clearer text structure.

iGCSE English Language: 4355 04

This was another good year for coursework; there is little to add to last year's comments. The candidature continues to grow and is as disparate as ever, but centres are clearly at ease with the requirements of the specifications in this component.

Candidate attainment was on a par with previous years' performances. Centre assessment was almost uniformly sound, with the exception of one or two centres, whose interpretation of the marking grid was over generous. Most centre assessment was justifiable with reference to the marking grids and comparable with the level of last year. Most large centres employ a rigorous internal moderation procedure, evidence for which is often provided by teacher annotation on the frontsheets. There were very few folders in the lower ranges of the marking grids, a reflection of the fact that the specification attracts centres (from both the U.K. and abroad) with strong academic traditions or potential.

Task setting for both the writing and the reading units was sometimes inspired, but more usually simply appropriate. In most instances the 'Personal and Imaginative' writing topics were well tailored to the individual candidate and there was much inventive linking of texts to provide challenging task for able candidates in the reading unit.

The quality of centre administration was high in almost every respect. Most centres' folders were sent to the moderator on time, and were appropriately and clearly organised and presented. The only moderator complaint would be about the use of paper clips to hold units together. A simple staple in the top left hand corner of the folder does the job admirably and makes the vetting of the folder much easier. The only noticeable weaknesses in administration were the failures to include the folders of the highest and lowest scoring candidate within the centre, in addition to the sample, and to submit a Coursework Authentication Sheet for each candidate in the sample. This is an inter-board requirement and is additional to the teacher signature on the frontsheet of the coursework folder.

Unit 1 Response to Section B of the Anthology

As already noted, task setting was sound. There were a variety of approaches, some relying on single texts, others (more productively) linking texts; the former were often detailed and developed but, within centres, very repetitious in content. The favourites amongst the linked texts were those set against a war background and usually the task made some reference to the suffering caused by war.

It is important for centres to ensure that tasks allow candidates to address the assessment objectives. Empathetic tasks, in particular, do not permit candidates to do this and should be reserved for the writing unit. Most topics, however, did allow candidates to consider the ways writers used linguistic devices for effect. Some did not; for instance, "Discuss the social injustice brought out by Sebastian Faulks in "The Last Night" invites a sociological response rather than linguistic analysis. Sharper phrasing of topics (for example "How does/do the writer(s) use language to create a sense of social injustice/alienation/suffering... etc." and "Compare the ways in which female characters are presented in...") points the candidate more clearly in the direction of an interpretation or commentary which addresses the assessment objectives. In some instances also there was a uniformity of response within a centre which suggested the candidates were working to a

template; one teacher wrote, on a candidate's response to this unit, the comment "some errors in interpretation" - perhaps - but candidates should be encouraged to explore texts for themselves and, even if they make 'mistakes', should be positively rewarded for personal interpretations, provided textual support is given for the ideas.

One centre used supplementary texts to stimulate engagement with the anthology text; this worked well because the main focus of the responses was the latter. It remains a high risk approach in the sense that only the actual work on the Anthology texts is assessable.

Unit 2 Personal and Imaginative Writing

There was, again an amazing variety of writing both across the whole candidature and within centres; most tasks seemed to have been tailored to the individual aptitude and interest of the candidate. There was, of course, some familiar material, but the best task setting allowed candidates to engage personally with the task, whether it was description, narrative or intellectual exploration, and often provided opportunities for the very ablest to experiment with both form and style, for instance mixed genre writing or stories with a particular kind of narrator. There was an innovative feel about some task titles (for example "Describe the experiences of the first ever humans to discover a new world" and "To sail with the creatures from beneath") which suggested a freshness of approach. Rather less successful responses were rather tired and limiting stories, probably modelled on a template (for example 'The Assassin'), and sometimes set against a social world seemingly at variance with the candidate's.

iGCSE English Language: 4355 1F Grade Boundaries

Option 1

03 WRITTEN ALTERNATIVE
1F WRITTEN PAPER 1F

Paper No	C	D	E	F	G
Lwr	59	50	41	32	23

Option 2

04 WRITTEN COURSEWORK
05 SPEAKING & LISTENING CSWK
1F WRITTEN PAPER 1F

Paper No	C	D	E	F	G
Lwr	60	48	36	25	14

Option 3

03 WRITTEN ALTERNATIVE
2H WRITTEN PAPER 2H

Paper No	*	A	B	C	D	E
Lwr	78	70	62	55	47	43

Option 4

04 WRITTEN COURSEWORK
05 SPEAKING & LISTENING CSWK
2H WRITTEN PAPER 2H

Paper No	*	A	B	C	D	E
Lwr	82	73	64	55	45	40

Option 5

04T TRANSFERRED WRITTEN CSWK.
05T TRANSF. SPEAK. & LIST. CSWK
1F WRITTEN PAPER 1F

Paper No	C	D	E	F	G
Lwr	60	48	36	25	14

Option 6

04T TRANSFERRED WRITTEN CSWK.
05T TRANSF. SPEAK. & LIST. CSWK
2H WRITTEN PAPER 2H

Paper No	*	A	B	C	D	E
Lwr	82	73	64	55	45	40

Note: Grade boundaries may vary from year to year and from subject to subject, depending on the demands of the question paper.

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