

OCR Report to Centres

November 2012

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This report on the examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the specification content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the examination.

OCR will not enter into any discussion or correspondence in connection with this report.

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General Certificate of Secondary Education

English Language (J355)

OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

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A643/A652 Section A – Speaking and Listening

General Comments

Candidates in this series were very much looking to improve on their Summer performance, supported by their centres. Centres had the benefit of centre specific feedback on their June entry, together with the wider Report to Centres on the June series. Added to this, the latest filmed support material for Speaking and Listening was available on-line from the beginning of the Autumn term, September 2012 to aid task setting and assessment. As with the previous support material, there was a section on the administrative procedures connected with this component.

The number of candidates entered from individual centres was on the whole not large; a high proportion of single candidate entries or small “resit” groups.

Task setting

Centres had covered a wide and interesting range of tasks across all three contexts. It was clear that teachers had put in a great deal of thought into designing activities that were appropriate to “resit” groups, often groups remodelled from their original GCSE ones. Different activities were offered with centres linking tasks to Sixth Form studies, giving a relevance and immediacy to performances; avoiding just repeating previous tasks without adding specific opportunities, to meet the assessment criteria more securely. Similarly audiences and purposes were changed to take into account extra maturity and confidence to offer greater challenges and so opportunities to succeed and achieve at a higher level.

The drama-focussed context was often more successful. Candidates, having been through the process, seemed to be clearer about what was required in order to succeed; more skilled in adopting and sustaining a role realistically and convincingly. However many centres still equate the drama-focussed context with drama/play based stimulus material. There is no requirement for the stimulus material to be drama based or even literary based; indeed more scope may be granted if candidates are freed from such, and are given the opportunity to create independent roles separated from play texts. There is always the danger of “muddying the waters” when assessing; how much of the assessment is based on knowledge of the play and how much on the creation and sustaining of a role. Many centres are using the drama-focussed context to link with the “real-life context” requirement to positive effect.

However as regards task setting, whilst many centres have embraced the “real-life context” requirement and are now setting imaginative and enabling activities, disappointingly many centres have not grasped the basic premise of it all. Quite simply it is a matter of the audience and the purpose of the speaking and listening involved, which extends beyond the classroom; not just the subject matter per se. The extended audience and purpose may be real or imagined, depending on the task and a centre’s circumstances. For this series as smaller numbers of candidates were often involved, centres used more actual “beyond the classroom” situations. Appropriate and successful tasks were; induction presentations to younger students new to the school; presentations to Sixth Form assemblies and groups of parents. Activities which did not meet the requirement were drama-focussed activities based on literary characters; interviewing the characters from “Of Mice and Men” can never fulfil this requirement. Neither does ticking all three contexts as having met the “real-life context” inspire any confidence in a centre having fully understood this aspect of task setting.

It is a centre’s responsibility to ensure that all candidates are set appropriate activities to meet the requirements, and that there is no discrepancy between groups. There were instances with this series as in previous ones, where one group/one teacher had obviously not understood the “real-life context”.

Some centres linked Speaking and Listening activities with work for A652 Section B: Spoken Language. Tasks used for this series were based largely on exploring the language of the interviewer. It is hoped that centres, as they become more confident in their task setting for this specification, will review their bank of tasks to make more opportunities for crossover activities with Spoken Language in particular. The unit was designed to be very much an interlinking one.

Task setting is the key to success; if a centre gets it wrong then candidates fail to meet the specification requirements and their potential. There exists a pool of easily accessible support to aid all task setting, the “real-life context” included. There are two Training and Guidance DVDs issued 2010 and 2011 and for 2012 on-line filmed material and downloadable guidance on the OCR website; these carefully explain whether an activity can be deemed a real-life context or not. There is also a specific guidance document, again on the website. A centre may have tasks validated by using the Controlled Assessment Consultancy. There is the report to centres written by the external moderator giving feedback on task setting amongst other aspects of postal moderation. Finally, as part of an Advisory visit, task setting is discussed.

Record keeping

A key part of the postal moderation process, are the candidate record sheets sent to the external moderator. The majority of centres submitted well presented, often word processed records using the standard OCR form. These record sheets provide the evidence upon which moderation is based, and in most cases the description of the activities, the comments on individual candidate performance and the final mark awarded were all as required; there were many examples of care and good practice.

However some centres and some teachers within a centre failed to supply all the necessary information. The descriptions of the tasks were too brief; a “talk to the class”, a “group discussion”, a “persuasive speech”, these all failed to give sufficient detail. The moderator can see that the basic three context requirements have been met, but is unable to judge the level of challenge involved, the complexity of the material, without the detail of the subject matter; how the task has been differentiated for the range of marks awarded.

Similarly, comments on individual performance must be personalised. When comments have just been “lifted” from the assessment criteria, without linking them to individual candidate achievement, or if all comments are virtually the same, then it is extremely difficult to support the centre’s marking and so moderate the centre effectively.

It must also be stressed that the audience for the candidate record sheet is the external moderator; not the candidate. If centres wish to give feedback to their students on performance and good practice is to do so, then informal tracking records may be devised and used. It is, and was for this series, a very small number of centres which made this mistake.

Thankfully for this series there were few mathematical and transcription errors. However, it was not completely trouble free, and completion of the moderation of these centres was delayed by the relevant forms being filled in and returned to ensure that candidates received the correct mark.

The Application of the Criteria

The first point to be made is, as with previous reports to centres for this specification, that no assumption must be made by centres as to the link between bands/marks and grades.

Centres are encouraged to think and assess in terms of bands and then award a mark within a band to fit the performance of the candidate; to resist the pressure to assign a grade.

With this series, the marks awarded were supported by comments on extra maturity resulting in an ability to analyse and reflect on experience and handle challenging material, synthesise

complex items, organise points and challenge assumptions. Comments from centres on performance often highlighted added skills in sensitive and sympathetic listening as a factor in improvement, and a willingness to encourage quieter members of the group to participate and then build on their contributions.

Good practice in awarding marks balances strengths and weaknesses, not just rewarding strengths; this is particularly important when awarding marks on band borderlines, giving an explanation, why just below, or just above. This all aids moderation.

Internal Standardisation Procedures

It is a requirement that centres complete form GCW330 a description of the centre's internal standardisation procedures for this component, and send this to the moderator, along with other relevant documentation.

From the descriptions and from observation on Advisory visits, the majority of centres are secure in their practices and many are very rigorous. Good practice procedures include the use of cross moderation of groups, joint marking exercises, reorganisation of groups for assessment, department Inset training using the centre's own or OCR supplied filmed material and the induction of new or inexperienced staff, often using a "buddy" system linking with experienced teachers.

Internal standardisation is concerned with task setting as dealt with previously and also to ensure all teachers preparing candidates for this component are marking in line with each other and in line with OCR's agreed standard. Crucial to this whole process is the use of the filmed material issued to centres. All teachers must have watched and discussed the assessments; it is the centre's responsibility to ensure that this has taken place.

Centres must revisit the assessments to keep their marking sharp and accurate. There are now two DVDs and filmed material on-line; so all staff should be able to access the standardisation material. In the description of procedures, it would be helpful if centres could be more specific in listing the OCR material used; rather than just stating "watched the DVD". The reference to specific material helps confirm that a centre is secure in its judgements.

All marking is confirmed by a visiting moderator, and centres should be aware that on instructions from OFQUAL the range of tolerance is much reduced.

Administration

The administration of this unit, once again, could have been smoother. Centres had been instructed to send all sample material to the moderator by November 5th. The moderation period was very tight, so many thanks to those centres which met this deadline. Feedback from centres on the June series, resulted in just one moderator being appointed, to cover A643 and A652, both Speaking and Listening and Spoken Language. This should have eased the process, but too many centres did not meet the deadline to moderators.

Centres more and more have non-specialist examination officers as the point of reference and dispatcher of moderation material, so the Head of English or teacher in charge of this component needs to assist in the smooth running of the process. They should, by now, know what is required. Hard copies of instructions are sent into centres and all is available on the OCR website. The centre report from June will have contained feedback on how smoothly this was administered.

As part of Advisory visits 2012-13, there will be a discrete session on administration.

However grateful acknowledgement is made to those centres, which got it right and enabled moderators to meet their deadlines.

Conclusion

Speaking and Listening has always been a real strength for candidates and it is obvious from postal moderation and from the visits into centres that as teachers become more confident and assured with this specification this will continue to be the case.

Attention is again strongly drawn to the Training and Guidance materials for this component itemised earlier. Also attention is strongly drawn, to the report sent to a centre after each series of exams. These give valuable feedback to centres; specific advice as to what is good practice in the centre and what area(s) need improvement. It is assumed these are read and acted upon.

Finally many thanks, as always, for the continuing hard work and commitment involved in preparing and assessing candidates for Speaking and Listening.

A651 Extended Literary Text and Imaginative Writing

Administrative Matters

The moderation processes adopted and developed by Centres for this Unit are generally robust and efficient. The evidence of accuracy in the candidate rank order manifests this; as well as the relevant and helpful remarks on the cover sheet; and the detailed annotation and commentary on each script. It is clear that the wording of the assessment objectives and the band descriptors is becoming increasingly familiar and meaningful to those involved in teaching, marking and moderating. However, this generally high standard was not consistently maintained in this session. Whether it was the haste, the time pressure or simply the extra load there were, proportionally more difficulties with administrative matters than previously.

There were very few instances of an erroneous rank order: and where there were, all the marks were within tolerance. Some candidates had been dealt with rather generously, however. Centres should note that work that conspicuously fails to fulfil any one of the descriptors is unlikely to be in the top (or even the top two) bands. For example, a literature essay that fails to support what is said with relevant and apt quotation or reference to structure will have a significantly lower mark than one that gives that support however good it may be in other respects. Similarly, in the writing responses extreme length (which can lead to inaccuracy, breakdown of grammatical and syntactical control) can become self-penalizing. By the same token, extremely short answers (say of less than 400 words) are unlikely to do enough to satisfy more than the middle bands, even when presented with a very high degree of technical accuracy.

The cover sheets were generally accurate. Comments could, on occasion, be more than straight "lifts" from the relevant band descriptors in order to give a clearer insight into the candidate's work and the reasons for the marks awarded. There were a number of instances of the incorrect presentation of the marks for the writing tasks. There should be **two** mark totals, one for each piece of writing. They should comprise **two** contributory marks: one out of 20 for AO4/1 & 2: and one out of 10 for AO4/3. The two totals should then be added and divided by two for the final mark. Too many students had their mark for each piece of writing represented by one mark out of 20: a serious potential handicap that moderators were vigilant in spotting and amending. It was disappointing that there was a relatively high incidence of arithmetical inaccuracy or, indeed complete absence in this session.

Centres are reminded that moderators expect to see some annotation on each page of each script, however concise that may be: and to see a summative comment at the end which relates to the comments on the cover sheet. All comments should be directed to the successive tiers of moderator: not to the student, however enthusiastic the teacher's response to the work has been. It is especially helpful if there is a good deal of clarity on where and why the mark for AO4/3 has been given.

We are very grateful for the prompt response from almost all Centres to moderator emails and telephone calls for further detail and paperwork in the middle of a busy term and busy assessment period.

Extended Literary Text

We believed that we had seen the last of the original tasks that had been completed in all four previous sessions of this Unit: some responses were very familiar to moderators.

The absolute favourite was still the task on disadvantaged characters in "Of Mice and Men". Many candidates still took the character-by-character approach to this, accumulating examples of disadvantage on five or more of the characters. This is a solid and generally reliable methodology but one which doesn't necessarily allow for a great deal of overview or comparison. It can also become a pedestrian plod through the narrative in the hands of less confident candidates. Better work took one or possibly two characters and gave an exhaustive analysis of the ways in which they are presented and supported that with comparisons and references to other disadvantages and characters to support the main thrust of their argument. Better still were essays that took an entirely thematic approach from the outset. This work ranged across the text in a non-linear narrative way to support and press points about the nature of personal disadvantage and Steinbeck's perspective on it. They were notable for the penetrating analysis of the detailed effects of particular language choices. Such work was in short supply in a session in which most candidates were looking to improve on a previous D or worse. Too many essays still sought to rely on random accounts of the social, cultural and historical context, which is NOT required in this Unit. Too many candidates CONTINUE to give the impression that the Wall Street Crash, the Dust Bowl and the American Dream all occurred in California in the "twenties and thirties". Such digressions are not helpful in the fulfilment of the Unit's specific band criteria.

There was virtually no work on any other prose text.

There were fewer essays on Shakespeare (proportionally) than in previous submissions. All that there were, focused on "Romeo and Juliet" and candidates maintained their attention on "victims of fate". However, this work in particular tended to reflect the greater maturity of the candidates who responded with a more objective and well balanced series of arguments that we saw in the summer. The gist of responses is still much the same: "Yes, but...." which reflected a pleasing overview of the play, mostly supported by supportive detail.

The more popular poets remain Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy and the poems chosen by candidates remain largely the same: school experiences in the latter and family matters in the former. Candidates showed very little advance in the confidence and clarity of their commentaries on these writers.

Relevance is the central key to success in all this work: candidates who are able to stay on task, show an original and consistent approach to it and to the text and, above all, support what they say with textual evidence are likely to be the more successful.

Personal and Imaginative Writing

The variety of approaches to all the topics failed to broaden and deepen in this session. There were relatively fewer long and rambling sagas and more crisply concise and well-integrated responses to core and choices of satellite task. Confidently sustained non-literal approaches worked well a few cases and the synthesis of a literal backbone (for example a recognizable journey) which then had a non literal superstructure grafted on to it was a pleasure to read, rare though that was. Like the reading responses, most of the work had a distinct sense of "déjà vu".

The word "control" appears frequently in the band descriptors. What precedes this is the choice of topic the candidate has made. It is crucial that this is something candidates know and care about, whatever that may be. The issue then is to develop the topic with clarity, integrity and relevance. Then the material will be controlled: to the degree suggested by the band descriptors. We do want to see and reward work that is original, thoughtful and ambitious. If all that means

that the piece is not fully controlled we will make allowances for that. Better this than an overly cautious and rather pedestrian approach to the writing, especially that which goes on at excessive length.

Choice of vocabulary, too, is very important in assessing and rewarding the writing tasks. The key here is to match the word as sensitively and subtly to the mood, intention, situation, and personality as possible. NOT *vice versa*, when there appears to have been a checklist of “impressive” vocabulary taken into the assessment session for mandatory use. Shades and subtlety of meaning will be rewarded for this particular bullet point.

The critical distinction between Bands 4 & 5 lies in the candidate’s ability to choose a task that plays to their writing strengths and relevant experience; is structured with a beginning, a middle and an end; and is reasonably secure in its punctuation, spelling and sentence structure.

Work that clearly fails to do this is less likely to be in Band 4.

Finally, Centres are again reminded that length in both reading and writing will not be taken as an indication of quality. Candidates can achieve very high marks within a very few pages: many thousands of words may produce mediocrity: but of course not necessarily so. Irrelevance should be very rare, given that candidates contextualise tasks in ways that make them specific to their “take” on the texts and areas of particular interest.

I am very grateful for the wide network of support given by the moderating teams, their team leaders, my Assistant Principal Moderator and the Qualifications Manager whose help and advice have again been assiduous and outstanding.

A652 Speaking and Listening and Spoken Language

General comments

The entry for this resit session was understandably small and some centres had unfortunately misunderstood the rubric requirement that none of the work submitted for a resit, including the speaking and listening tasks, may have submitted as part of a previous session.

Centres are to be commended for their diligence in administering the component. There were detailed and precise comments on the work and CAFs, identifying how the marking criteria had been applied and there was often clear evidence of internal standardisation.

The contextualisation of tasks was in most cases effective and enabled candidates to meet the assessment objectives. Many candidates compared two or more texts as part of their study; centres should note that comparison is not a requirement of this component but in some cases the comparative aspect may enable candidates to analyse patterns of language across texts.

The phrasing of the task was important in supporting the candidate to meet criteria. In some cases candidates had been given the task as set by OCR and in others candidates in directed to focus on particular aspects of the text. Again centres are advised to consider carefully how to contextualise the task for their particular candidates. An overly broad task can invite candidates to talk in generalities and not attend to the detail of the text; on the other hand, too much guidance can restrict candidates' responses and limit their achievement. Centres are reminded of the availability of the Controlled Assessment Consultancy Service which provides guidance on task setting on contextualisation.

When considering different groups and contexts, it is important in this component that candidates are steered away from making sweeping and unsubstantiated generalisations about social class, levels of education etc.

The vast majority of candidates sitting this session had completed the task on Obama. Where candidates were most successful, they demonstrated a clear and confident understanding of Obama's purposes in particular contexts and were then able to explore how he had adapted language in pursuit of these ends. As well as considering the detail of the texts, high performing candidates considered the flow and structure of the speech(es) as a whole, commenting on how Obama uses the progression of ideas to direct the response of his audience.

Candidates who adopted a 'feature spotting' approach tended to be less successful. They tended to focus on the most easily identifiable rhetorical devices and, because they had not engaged fully with meaning and purposes, comments tended to be restricted to the superficial.

A few candidates had responded to the Paxman task and compared the way Paxman's language differed when he was speaking to Baroness Amos and Dizzee Rascal. All were able to identify that Dizzee Rascal was out of his linguistic 'comfort zone' and sought to consider to what extent Paxman's questioning was supportive and to what extent condescending, although there were some markedly different interpretations of Paxman's questioning and attitude towards the Hip Hop artist.

A680 Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)

General Comments

The question paper proved to be accessible and of an appropriate level of demand for the tier. Candidates readily engaged with the reading material for Section A: the ways railways deal with the problem of slippery tracks (Text A) and the leaflet asking for support to save woodlands (Text B). The two writing tasks were equally popular.

The majority of candidates had obviously been very well-prepared for the examination and schools are now familiar with the format of questions and booklet. The spaces provided for responses were sufficient for all but a few candidates, who used the extra pages at the end of the booklet (new for this session). Mostly these were used for continuation of 2(a) and for the writing task, particularly where the first page of Q3/4 was used for planning. However, it should be noted that lengthy answers are not necessary to achieve a good grade and recourse to the extra pages should be rare.

In most cases, candidates appeared to have followed the advice regarding time allocation; few responses showed evidence of running out of time.

Individual Questions

Section A – Reading

No examiners reported any instances of candidates using the incorrect text for Q1, but a few candidates used Text A to answer 2(a) and then proceeded to use Text B for 2(b). Some candidates used headings to respond to 2(b), even when they had also used them for 2(a). There seemed to be more instances of this error than might be expected.

Questions 1 and 2 are assessed for candidates reading ability only, so the inclusion of their own views, however well-expressed, cannot be rewarded.

Question 1

1(a) – 1(c): These short answers generally helped candidates to make a secure start to the paper. The answer for 1(a) required just one word: 'surprise'. Although most found the correct word, a number wrote either 'major' or 'challenge', neither of which provide a coherent answer to the question. Most candidates scored 5 or 6 marks. There was little evidence of verbatim copying of large sections of text. Those who lost marks did so through careless reading of question or text.

1(d): Examiners reported a good response to this question with less copying and more focus on the task and an ability to express points in own words. Many stronger candidates also selected suitable material and made a good number of points, and marks in the Band 5 and Band 4 range were common. Better candidates also made genuine efforts to show that they had fully understood points by expressing them in their own words. Good examples are that the trains 'activated' machines to replace 'triggered' them, and machines use 'jet-powered' instead of 'high pressure' water. Some struggled valiantly to avoid using as many words from the passage as possible; unfortunately sometimes this actually obscured meaning and clarity or simply read very oddly: 'broken nature' for 'fallen trees' for example.

The less successful responses simply altered occasional words or inverted the sentence structure in the hope that this would be construed as 'own words'. They tended to work mechanically through the passage, including all the material with little alteration or with lifting. Others lapsed into comment, perhaps on how commendable it is that such care is being taken of

passengers' safety or gave explanations of how 'environmentally-friendly weed killer' is preferable. Some omitted consideration of either the first or last paragraphs of text. However, as undue emphasis is not placed in the mark scheme on the number of points made, these candidates were still able to demonstrate all the necessary descriptors to achieve Band 4.

Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of 2(a) and 2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. A few candidates used the passage for Q1 for 2(a) – though not for 2(b).

2(a) Candidates were secure with this question, commenting successfully on a sensible number of photographs and headings; very few tried to cover all of the available material. A lot of candidates, however, used the additional pages for this question, sometimes to no extra gain. It should be noted that many responses which did not even use the whole of the allocated space were still able to achieve either Band 4 or Above Band 4. Popular comments were on the contrast between the 'before' and 'after' photos of the forest and on the 'cute' animals that would lose their habitat. Inevitably the 'rule of three' heading proved irresistible but also came with effective analysis of the shocking figures given and the drama of the 'countdown'. Strong responses were able to focus on the emotional impact of the leaflet, in particular how the pronouns include the reader and the repetition of 'save'.

Weaker responses simply identified features without comment or made generic points which could apply to any text: 'the headings make you want to read on'; 'the pictures grab your attention'. These are not given any reward. Some said that 'the headings were green', which is of little value but better candidates went on to comment on the link with the woodland, nature and conservation, which is valid analysis. Other comments on the colours used in the leaflet, which were frequent, were usually stretching the point: 'the words are in white which stands for purity'.

2(b) Successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to choose and analyse relevant detail, commenting on both the information given and specific words and phrases which persuaded readers that they should contribute to the Woodland Trust. Indeed, the quality of analytical comment is the discriminator in this question which focuses on how the writing achieves its effects. It was noticeable that more candidates are choosing particular words or short phrases rather than lengthy quotations; this certainly led to stronger responses with many in Band 4. Examples of good practice showing concise yet astute analysis include 'right away' with its connotations of urgency, 'irreplaceable' with the sense of being lost forever and 'unique habitat' as somewhere special that cannot be found elsewhere. Many responses again commented on the direct address to the reader, its sense of inclusion or working as a team and the resulting 'guilt trip' if you choose not to donate the small amount - £2.75 – the repetition of which was invariably mentioned. One particularly perspicacious candidate commented on the irony of an organisation purporting to be concerned about conserving trees then cutting down a number of them to produce such a leaflet!

Weaker responses tended to use long quotations which included the information points, or their analysis of words and phrases simply said that they were 'important', which refers back to the question but does not explain in a helpful way. The most significant problem was the use of headings in 2(b) – many used the same ones that they had already quoted in 2(a) – and it was disappointing that, often, so much of the response was therefore not relevant or admissible.

Section B – Writing

Questions 3 and 4

Examiners saw the full range of performance but, in this session, there were noticeably more responses in Band 5 and above. There was an even split between the two tasks. Many candidates made use of planning and it was pleasing to see the time and effort taken. Sometimes this was useful but it did not always result in a structured response with clear direction. Better candidates were able to produce an engaging opening, clear development and a considered ending. Paragraphing, however, was too often absent, random or not effective. The planning sometimes consisted of a row of punctuation marks which were ticked off when used – often incorrectly. This is not an approach to be encouraged. In less successful responses there was writing that lost focus on the task and, more often, repeated the same ideas using the same vocabulary. Some were not relevant or barely so; attempting to ‘fit’ a topic that is favoured (usually involving a sport) to the question rarely leads to a convincing response. Some referred back to the question in the last sentence and hoped that this would be sufficient to mask deficiencies.

It should be emphasised that the quality of writing is being assessed rather than quantity. There should be no need for candidates to use additional pages. Very short answers will be self-limiting because of the lack of development but many excellent responses were seen which covered no more than two pages.

Candidates should take care with handwriting and allow time to check spelling and punctuation. Some essays were almost illegible and, as letters were not formed correctly, the words were marked as mis-spelt. The need to ‘re-read’ until meaning is clear is a feature of the lower Bands and it is a pity that some candidates who had plenty of interesting material penalized themselves in this way. Common errors include confusion over ‘there’, ‘their’ and ‘they’re’ and ‘your and ‘you’re’. Apostrophes were rarely used correctly or consistently but, more worryingly, capital letters were a widespread weakness, both lack of them at the start of a sentence and random ones used without reason. Sentence separation was sound in only a minority of responses – usually candidates adopted either ‘stream of consciousness’ style or one comma after another instead of full stops, though this varied between centres. The use of ‘program’ when referring to a television programme was ubiquitous as was ‘tele’ for ‘television’.

Question 3

This asked candidates to relate an event to a particular season and say what it meant to them. Inevitably the most popular choice by far was winter and Christmas (often spelt with a small ‘c’), with many lively, detailed and evocative descriptions of family traditions and spending quality time together with relatives not seen during the rest of the year. The best managed to create on paper the warmth and fun experienced in real life. Weaker responses were rather bland with stereotypical descriptions of Santa, presents and turkey; they could have been more successful with use of a wider vocabulary. There were a few accounts of birthdays, November 5th, Hallowe’en and Eid but these were rare. As mentioned earlier, some struggled to make their chosen ‘event’ fit the question but, thankfully, few resorted to this. The question gave the opportunity for ample relevant material to come easily to mind.

Question 4

This asked candidates to give their views on the importance of television to young people, in the form of a speech to classmates. Many found this an inviting style; it had clearly been practised beforehand and there were some lively and appropriate responses. Weaker candidates just started with 'Hi, class' and finished with 'Thank you for listening' with little in between to suggest a speech. Some centres seemed to ignore the requirement to write in this style altogether. This question really needed to be planned if the response was to sustain direction, not lose focus and become repetitive, as was the case far too often. Most opted for the 'pros and cons' approach, which generally worked well, and most expressed their own opinion one way or the other by the end of the response. This was surprisingly evenly balanced! On the 'pro' side, most suggested that television was educational, though this sometimes led to a rather tedious list of channels and what they offer. Television also allowed young people to stay in touch with current affairs, the main topics of conversation at school and encouraged friendships because you can sit around at home with 'mates' and enjoy a program (sic) together. The 'cons' thought, however, that it discouraged communication and successful friendships, resulting in people who are unfit and can't be bothered to go out with their friends. Many cited the issue of ruining your eyesight and, at this point, introduced some statistics about the number of those who watch too much television who will end up with glasses. There was thankfully less of a tendency to overdo the use of statistics in this session.

A680 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

This report might be usefully read alongside the Teacher Guide for A680, which can be found on the OCR website.

Candidates found the familiar topic of school uniform readily accessible and responded well to both the reading texts and the questions. Examiners were pleased to report that there were a number of candidates who demonstrated very shrewd understanding of how to approach this paper and they offered responses clearly worthy of top band marks, however, as might be expected in a re-sit session, examiners also saw many more scripts that showed one or more areas of weakness. Most candidates completed the paper but a significant number of scripts fell into rubric error, such as use of Text A for Q3. Examiners also noted that a number of candidates had left insufficient time for planning out and developing their Writing responses.

A number of candidates had been wrongly entered for Higher Tier this session. Centres looking to support their students in this component should consider that the more structured approach to reading texts offered at Foundation Tier can prove beneficial for weaker candidates.

Question 1

Most candidates showed understanding of the content of the passage but there was less assurance around the demands of the task. There is a need to deliver a wide range of points, concisely, in a well-organised response. Candidates should show understanding through selection and synthesis. The best answers kept firm focus on the arguments against compulsory school uniform. Weaker answers lapsed into unnecessary detail, such as listing all the items of uniform that might be lost in the wash. Excessive length was a feature of most of the less successful responses.

Some candidates offered their own views on uniform and began to either agree or disagree with the writer's argument. Personal opinion has no place in this task and focus on the article must be maintained. Additionally, there were candidates who adopted a style of language commentary more appropriate to Question 2 and began discussion of how the argument is presented. Such responses cannot be successful. Centres should ensure that all candidates are aware that this type of critical comment has no place in Question 1.

Candidates are directed to use their own words 'as far as possible' here. This must be carefully balanced so that use of own words does not distort or blur the point being delivered. Examiners do acknowledge that inevitably some of the words from the text will be used, but what candidates must avoid is quotation and mere 'lifting' of lines from the text, as this does not show understanding. The word 'uniform' did not have to be replaced by 'outfits that comply with regulations'.

Question 2

The question directed candidates to consider **how** features of presentation and use of language convey the writer's dislike of school uniform. There was plenty of comment on the writer's choice of language – 'the deadening hand of uniformity' contrasted with feelings of 'liberation', for example. Candidates invariably picked up on 'itchy' uniform and wrote eloquently on how this made them feel. The emotional effect of 'dread' towards uniform and the sympathy created for poorer families was explored, alongside the 'hell' of getting uniform ready. Candidates proved very alert to what was one of the more subtle ideas, that parents are sometimes the victims of a supply chain 'racket'.

Many candidates made effort to explore the construction of the argument whereby pro-uniform ideas ('raise standards'... 'promote equality'), were considered and then knocked down with a fairly decisive body of evidence, blending facts, statistics and personal experience.

Weaker responses tended to confine attention to the picture and the headings. It should be noted that comment on images is only worthy of credit if the comment is linked to the text and shows understanding of how the picture supports the point of view. Simple comment on the fact that no individual could be discerned in the crowd of school girls was quite sufficient with, perhaps, some further comment on the dull clothing. There was no need to describe the traffic and the trees. Again, some answers were little more than a list of devices 'usually' found in media texts. Simply identifying 'dreary duplication' as alliteration achieves nothing without connection to the argument being put forward. As with Q1, it was not appropriate to bring in personal comment.

Question 3

Successful responses to this text offered secure understanding of how the piece is structured and that the initial sympathy for 'kids' (in uniform that was again 'itchy') does take a different direction in the second half of the article after, 'I see things differently.' Candidates told us that the extract 'turns', 'spins', and 'flips' at this point and examiners were happy to credit any sense that the argument falls into two distinct parts, with two distinct tones of voice.

Language comment frequently focussed on how the writer establishes a connection with the 'kids' ('you can't blame them', 'I nod sympathetically'), while insisting on her own 'wisdom' at the end. Candidates picked up on the implicit idea that she has perhaps earned the right to assert her opinion through personal experience. There was lively comment on the contrasting descriptions of the girls in 'ghastly green' alongside the girls 'strutting' and 'flaunting' their designer clothes. Candidates were quick to point out that the description of the 'primped' and 'gelled' girls was not entirely flattering. They 'whiffed'. In line with the view of the writer, candidates made some scathing comments about teachers who wear jeans and high fashion clothes to school.

Candidates often had less to say about the concluding section and it is worth pointing out that language which is not obviously flamboyant is still worthy of comment. The change in tone to more serious, even solemn consideration of 'manners', 'respect' and 'established values' was noted by many and linked to a change in perspective, from the teenagers' view ('Like, I can't bear it, you know?'), to the adults' view ('Old-fashioned it may be....').

Successful responses to questions 2 and 3 will always avoid empty formulaic comments about the extract being 'relatable' and 'drawing you in' and will instead offer clear, precise direct reference. Answers that simply describe what can be seen ('a mixture of long and short paragraphs') are offering little to credit. It will never be helpful to tell the examiner that there are 'black letters on white paper.'

Centres preparing candidates for this component should note that achievement is very closely linked to a clear understanding of purpose. Emphasis must be placed on understanding of how to meet the demands of the individual tasks.

SECTION B WRITING

Question 4

This was a popular choice and candidates of all abilities had plenty to say. Material from the given texts proved a helpful stimulus, with candidates frequently picking up on the ideas around duplication and diversity from Text A. Use of material from the reading booklet is entirely acceptable and does offer candidates a way into the topic, although candidates should be cautioned that they must not simply repeat sections of text. We are looking to reward original use of language.

No audience was given for this task, although some candidates did choose to adopt a discursive tone as if in a debate or speech. Again this was acceptable. Where no audience is stated the implied audience is simply the examiner and the examiner will credit a variety of approaches. The best responses were well-organised and showed evidence of careful planning. Good focus on 'how important...' and 'how easy...' supported candidates in the construction of their responses.

Responses that achieved some balance and considered both issues of individuality and those aspects of modern life that might impact on this were among the most successful. Content was wide-ranging and certainly not confined simply to matters of dress. Thoughtful exploration of the topic was well-evidenced, with a number of responses arguing that actually individuality was much over-rated and there was a lot to be said for belonging to a group.

Question 5

This produced a wide variety of responses although curiously several pieces began, 'It was the night of the prom....' and examiners who served on the June panel experienced a sense of déjà vu.

This task did specify a genre and audience in the diary/blog format and this was clearly familiar to most. Many candidates used their chosen format creatively, often to humorous effect, although those that simply started 'Dear Diary' also fulfilled the brief. The more self-contained nature of a blog or diary did help candidates to avoid excessive length and responses to this task were generally quite well-structured. It is worth pointing out that candidates who choose to adopt an entirely peer-focussed, 'chatty' style should still try to include some more complex vocabulary and structures if they aspire to the higher bands.

Examiners appreciated the amusing and engaging narratives offered and certainly marvelled at the lengths to which candidates will go in pursuit of their individual style. Many narratives included an 'exasperated Head of Year' – a figure with whom we all identified – trying to find the precise uniform infringement that would justify sending the bizarrely attired student home. The student usually won.

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