

English Language

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J355**

OCR Report to Centres

June 2013

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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.

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CONTENTS

General Certificate of Secondary Education

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OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

Content	Page
A651 Extended Literary Text and Imaginative Writing	1
A652A Speaking and Listening	5
A652B Spoken Language Study	10
A680.01 Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)	13
A680.02 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)	18

A651 Extended Literary Text and Imaginative Writing

General Comments

It was pleasing to that there were more new centres and many more candidates submitting work for moderation in this session. Moderators reported that the quality of the work was as good if not better than previously. This was fairly obviously related to the move to an exclusively linear qualification, which reflects greater maturity in the candidates and greater experience in the teaching of this part of the specification. The effects of centre visits, twilight training sessions and the like are becoming clearer in informing and shaping the work produced with greater precision and authority.

Tasks, Texts and Responses

Almost all the work on texts was, again, on “Of Mice and Men”. Some candidates wrote about “Romeo and Juliet”, “Tsotsi”, Duffy and Armitage. Pleasingly, many candidates had chosen to explore their text by way of one of the themed tasks, more usually “How does the writer create a memorable climax to a text you have studied?”

In this case it was especially refreshing to see that candidates did not simply take “climax” to mean “the end”. Instead many gained credit in using the task as a prompt to explore the structure of their chosen text. This enabled candidates to access the higher bands (three and above) where structure is specifically asked for in the relevant band descriptors.

The central band 4-6 descriptor is “understands and demonstrates how meaning is conveyed”. In band 3 and above this is developed to include “evaluating (commenting on/ making judgements about) language and structure as appropriate” (in ways that are relevant to task and text). Such an approach would certainly be beneficial to all candidates, irrespective of their aspirations or their choice of task and text, insofar that they can talk about language and structure throughout the piece, rather than focusing exclusively on the former.

This first themed task worked to palpably good effect in “Romeo and Juliet” where candidates took Act Three Scene One as the memorable climax. They were able to give a very thorough and well supported analysis of what is an arresting but accessibly compact moment in the play and to go on and see the scene in the context of the overall shape and structure of the play to chart its causes and effects. The same approach worked very well on the fight between Curley and Lennie in “Of Mice and Men”.

The vast majority of work, however, focused on “How does Steinbeck explore different attitudes to women in the novel?”

It was pleasing to see the high quality of most of the responses to this, given the views it attracted as the successor task to the very well received “disadvantaged characters” in the previous series. The best answers gave clear and well supported accounts of not only Curley’s wife but also the contrasts provided by Aunt Clara and, on the other hand, the finer distinctions between Susy and Clara, their establishments and employees. Good answers made clear and distinctive separations between not only these characters but also the attitudes of the (or some of the) male characters. Strong links were made between the way Candy’s weakness of character shapes his attitude to Curley’s wife and Slim’s strength allows him to take a different view. The ways in which the attitudes of George and, on the other hand, Lennie to the lady are driven and formed also gave rise to much acute analysis.

Less successful responses, as so often in this Unit, were shaped rather more by perceptions of the social context than of the developed detail of the text.

To repeat what has been said in successive Reports to Centres: references to Social/Cultural/Historical context are not sought here and are not required. They do not necessarily detract from the merits of a response but they rarely do much to enhance it. This is especially true of received, often generic comments, which tend to become clichés. For example, “all women in this period were housewives or prostitutes” is actually written quite often and is not helpful.

Much better to explore the attitudes the men have to the prostitutes as presented in the text and link that to the way their loneliness shapes the double standard that can approve of both Aunt Clara and Susy to the mutual exclusion/disrespect of neither. A lot of otherwise good work did this but still became confused over where Curley’s wife, who was rightly seen as the central female character, fitted. The best essays explored this dilemma, seeing things clearly from multiple points of view, including her own.

Whilst all this good practice is to be welcomed and encouraged it is still disappointing that so few candidates explore alternative texts. Those writing on Shakespeare all did so on “Romeo and Juliet”. Those who did not take the themed task (as referred to above) wrote with confidence and to good effect on “two or three of the older generation” in the play. Almost all chose the Nurse and the Friar and sometimes added points on the protagonists’ parents. Generally what was said was clearer on the characters than on “their roles in the play’s tragic conclusion”. This latter part of the task might, in some cases, have been developed more fully, especially with regard to what is said and done in the final scene.

It was pleasing to see work on a variety of poets represented in the “Reflections” Anthology. Most frequent was work on Owen under the set task “How does Owen portray the experience of going to fight...?” Choices of text were ambitious: many candidates choosing both “Exposure” and “Spring Offensive” for example. Others stuck with the popular “Dulce et Decorum...” and “Anthem for Doomed Youth”. Most candidates were generally well informed about Owen and his concerns: the best work gave an unremitting focus to the detail and effects of his language choices.

Imaginative Writing

Much the more popular of the two writing tasks was “The Last Time”. As we hoped, this prompt elicited a very wide range of material and approaches to its development. The best work was generally (but by no means exclusively) drawn in the first instance from personal experience and worked up from a very well anchored starting point. Especially pleasing was the fact that very few candidates were tempted to write derivative accounts of war, bloodshed and extermination. Much sensitivity and well-discriminated choices were the order of the day and teachers are to be congratulated on steering candidates in directions that often displayed compassion, sympathy and awe in convincing and authentic detail.

The satellite tasks followed 1-3 in order of popularity. There was an encouraging lack of derivation and pre-supposed formality in the writing of biographies and autobiographies: accounts were clear and direct. Those who chose the interview or leaflet formats had done so consciously, regardless of the degree of direct connection with “The Last Time”. It is pleasing to see that very few candidates wrote at too great a length or attempted to emulate literary sub genres, the Tolkien style saga, for example.

There were fewer but mainly very strong responses to the “success or failure” prompt. However, the majority of them were successful because the candidates had something of great personal concern and importance to communicate. This is always a good starting point for successful work.

Good tests of the merit of a candidate’s writing are often:-

- The degree of control there has been in shaping and developing the chosen (raw) material of the piece: is this greater or lesser than the sum of its parts? How completely integrated are its different (and quite possibly disparate) elements?
- The range and appropriateness of the vocabulary: is it apt, precise, well separated and lacking repetition?

Finally centres and candidates are to be congratulated on the freshness, originality and enthusiasm that characterised much of the work that moderators read.

Administrative Matters

It was striking that centres were very successful and accurate in the moderation process. Moderators had little to disagree with in band, mark or rank order. This suggests that the job is, as I suggest above, being carried out with increasing competence and confidence.

Otherwise there is little new to report here.

A very few centres were quite late in submitting moderation samples: but many more were pleasingly prompt, allowing moderation to at least in part start early at the commencement of a busy assessment schedule.

There is still occasional disparity between very fully completed paperwork and a paucity of annotation on scripts to show exactly where and how marks have been awarded. Where paperwork was incomplete or in error centres were very prompt and efficient in supplying what moderators required.

Some centres had not moved on to the new tasks: and had to seek the Awarding Body's retrospective permission to submit the original ones.

The ascription and recording of marks for the writing tasks: separate marks for the different AOs for each piece, then totalled and averaged, was carried out very efficiently in this session.

We are grateful to centres for their efficiency and close cooperation: this augurs very well for A651 in future series.

A652A Speaking and Listening

General Comments

The entry for both units was large, with many centres choosing to use Speaking and Listening to satisfy the terminal rule. The terminal rule allows centres to use any of the Controlled Assessment units for final assessment, so centres, which had deferred entry for the January series, submitted work to be assessed for this series.

A652 Section A must be submitted for the same series as A652 Section B: the Spoken Language study, so this was an additional factor influencing a centre's entry decision.

For this series, responding to feedback from centres, as with January 2013, one moderator was responsible for all three components: A643/A652 Section A and A652 Section B, to reduce the number of separate moderators, with whom centres had to deal.

The Training and Guidance filmed footage, to support centres this academic year, was issued online to enable all teachers preparing candidates to access the material for assessment purposes, task setting and administration. As with the two previously issued DVDs, there was a complete range of activities across all three contexts, but which gave specific support to the "real-life" context and task setting for the drama-focussed context. These two areas were identified as being problematic for some centres.

Advisory visits to centres have been profitable, with centres responding to the requirement, in the main, in a positive and professional manner, working happily with the criteria and acting upon the advice given.

Task setting

Centres are experienced in task setting to cover the requirements of the three different contexts. It was clear that some departments and individual teachers had put a great deal of thought into designing tasks, which would allow achievement across the ability range, and into providing opportunities for candidates to succeed.

Task setting is crucial in determining successful outcomes for this component, and centres are always advised to set tasks, which allow the assessment criteria to be met, and are engaging and relevant for the candidates. However centres must be made aware of the fact that some tasks can be limiting, by their very nature.

Giving candidates the freedom to choose - for example - the subject matter of a presentation for the Individual Extended Contribution, without guidance, may lead to underperformance. So using examples from this series, a presentation on "Girl Guiding and whether gender specific organisations are still appropriate in this day of equality" allows achievement in the higher bands; a talk on "My favourite horse" is less likely to do so.

However more worryingly, the requirement of the "real-life context in and beyond the classroom" is still proving problematic for some centres, despite being now well into the life of this specification. The repeated advice to centres is that it is not just a matter of subject matter, but rather it is a question of purpose and audience, which extends the performance "beyond the classroom". A talk per se, regardless of the subject matter, does not meet this requirement. It does not alter the validity by calling it "a formal talk" or "a conference talk", if the presentation is still to the rest of the class and if they are not in any other role other than themselves.

So a talk on work experience is no different to one, say, on fishing; both are straightforward talks to the rest of the class. Similarly deciding, "Who is to blame for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet?" set in a mock court scene, with candidates in role as characters from the play cannot be classed as "real-life".

However many centres have embraced the “real-life” context with enthusiasm and likewise their candidates, seeing it as an opportunity to extend and demonstrate their skills.

Similarly problematic for some centres is the drama-focussed context. Increasingly centres seem to assume that drama-focussed means that the stimulus material must be drama text based. Speaking and Listening requirements seem to get confused with those for Drama as a separate subject. So techniques appropriate to Drama, freeze frames and the like are not appropriate for this component, where the emphasis is always on Speaking and Listening.

Too close a link with a drama text does not always allow candidates to create and develop independent characters of their own. Performing a scene verbatim from a play, usually the set Shakespeare play, without any adaptation, does not allow candidates the opportunity to meet the assessment criteria.

The extra scene or speech is often a popular valid activity, but care must be taken not to stretch the bounds of credibility or set inappropriate tasks, which do not allow candidates to achieve their potential. Hot seating Lennie from “Of Mice and Men” would be one such task, with limited verbal responses possible.

The number of centres, which link, Speaking and Listening activities, with the work for the A652 Spoken Language study, remains surprisingly small. Successful tasks linked studies of the language of a public figure; often Martin Luther King, his techniques used, to presentations in the style of. It is an opportunity missed to support candidates in preparing for their controlled assessment task for Spoken Language.

Reference has been made to the support available as regards task setting for all aspects of Speaking and Listening. The tasks illustrated on DVD and online filmed footage, are all valid and to be used together with the commentaries and a guidance document available on the OCR website, specifically for the “real-life” context. The Controlled Assessment Consultancy is always available to centres seeking further advice on individual tasks and through this a centre’s tasks may be validated. Centres with previous entries will have had direct feedback regarding task setting and task setting is always a major aspect of Advisory visits by external moderators.

Record keeping

A key part of the process is record keeping. Centres are advised to maintain on-going records for all candidates, perhaps making use of a centrally-held database of marks for candidates, with written comments. These procedures represent good practice in centres, and help to prevent problems arising from staff absences or changes of staff. They also help in the selection of the final three activities to be used to form the basis for assessment. Good practice continues to be multiple opportunities, with the final selection being on an individual basis.

Many centres have their own working records, which contain feedback to candidates and candidate involvement in the process. Final submission for assessment is then on the OCR Controlled Assessment form for Speaking and Listening, which covers all the necessary elements, required by the external moderator.

Centres must remember that candidates’ record sheets form a vital piece of evidence in the moderation process. If there is a lack of detail in the description of activities or when comments on performance have been “lifted” directly from the band descriptors with little or no linkage to individual candidate achievement, then it is extremely difficult to carry out the moderation of a centre.

Worryingly some centres came close to having records returned to be re-submitted with the necessary range and detail of comment. Typical lack of detail in description would be “a talk to the class” or “a group discussion on the poetry” or “court scene ‘Romeo and Juliet’”. The level of challenge or complexity involved cannot be judged without the specific subject matter, or in the case of the drama-focussed context, the role adopted and developed.

Similarly bland, generalised comments regarding performance, where it is impossible to distinguish one candidate's performance from another's, or which band descriptors are being employed, are unsatisfactory.

It is important that all the teachers preparing and assessing candidates adopt a common approach to filling in the record sheets and that good practice is enforced throughout a centre. There was often great variation within a centre, with those providing detailed, helpful and pertinent comments on candidates, to those whose forms were at best perfunctory.

It is a centre's responsibility to ensure that external moderators are supplied with a comprehensive set of records, with all sections completed and marks/arithmetic checked to eliminate mathematical and transcription errors.

Thankfully the majority of centres provided all the necessary information, with well presented records, increasingly word processed in part and as a whole.

The Application of the Criteria

The starting point for this must be achievement as set against the performance criteria, fixing first on a band and then secondly the mark within the band range. Comments on achievement on candidates' records should make reference to the band descriptors and give a mark out of 40 for each separate context.

Worryingly it was noted that not all centres or individual teachers within centres matched band descriptors used to the marks awarded. There were discrepancies with teachers not seeming to describe performance accurately. Good practice in awarding marks balances strengths and weaknesses, not just rewarding strengths. An explanation is given, for example as to why a candidate failed to achieve the next band when on a borderline. This aspect of the application of the criteria is particularly important, where there is bunching of marks, to distinguish separate performances.

The final mark is based on a simple mathematical calculation; the three separate marks are totalled and divided by three. Centres are advised to check the final calculations carefully as some mistakes were discovered by moderators.

Importantly no assumption should be made as to a link between bands/marks and grades.

Internal Standardisation Procedures

The majority of centres continue to have secure, often very rigorous procedures in place to ensure internal standardisation of the marks. Good practice is to use cross moderation/marketing exercises across groups, reorganisation of groups for assessment and department marking often using centre filmed material, together with using the filmed assessment evidence provided annually by OCR.

Centres are reminded that it is essential that all staff preparing and assessing candidates watch and discuss the filmed assessments. Signing the GCW330 form testifies to this having taken place.

However it was apparent that this had not taken place in all centres. The internally set standard must be confirmed against OCR's Agreed Standard. This is done by assessing and comparing the marks awarded by OCR for the filmed assessments, with the centre's marks, irrespective of centre size. The centre must then adjust its standard where necessary. Centre visits by an external moderator further confirm a centre's marking.

Worryingly, even though some centres indicated that they have watched the DVDs/filmed footage, they still get the “real-life” context wrong. Also centres are warned against using out of date, old material from previous specifications. Some centres refer to material on video cassette but all material for this specification has been issued on DVD or as online footage.

Standardisation procedures should cover assessment, task setting (not necessarily the same tasks across all groups, but all candidates meeting all the requirements) and record keeping.

Administration

Unfortunately the administration for this unit seems to be becoming worse every subsequent series. Centres which were always reliable and efficient have become much less so, seemingly bewildered by procedures, sampling arrangements and the relevant documentation.

Moderators have reported centres being weeks late in sending all the relevant material, with no explanation. In some instances, thankfully a small number, but there should not be any, moderators have received negative reactions, when legitimately asking for moderation material. It is essential that centres familiarise themselves with the deadline dates and procedures pertinent to this unit. It is in the interests of all parties that deadlines are met, and that candidates’ results are not put in jeopardy.

To streamline procedures, as stated previously, one moderator rather than three dealt with a centre, but some centres confused the different sampling arrangements for Spoken Language and those for Speaking and Listening. The Spoken Language sample is selected by OCR and an e-mail request is sent to centres. For Speaking and Listening only, the sample is selected by the centre, as indicated in the specification.

However even though one moderator is involved, centres should keep the three components separate: A643, A652 Speaking and Listening and A652 Spoken Language. The moderation material should be presented in an easily identifiable form. Much time-consuming work was involved separating forms and documentation before moderation could take place.

To summarise, Instructions to Centres on Moderation are available on the OCR website, as are all relevant forms, hard copies are sent into centres; administration procedures also form a section on the online filmed footage 2012-13 and on previous DVDs.

As centres increasingly move to systems where non-specialist examinations officers are the point of reference and dispatchers of moderation material, it is vital for the smooth running of the process that instructions regarding procedures are read, understood and carried out by all relevant parties. Examinations officers need the support of Heads of English or their deputies in all this.

Conclusion

In conclusion it cannot be stressed enough that centres make use of all the support material readily available for this unit, mention of which has been made previously, but to summarise:

- DVDs with commentaries and guidance, issued 2010 and 2011
- Online filmed material with accompanying commentary and guidance; 2012-13 and the new 2013-14 material issued at the beginning of the academic year
- Specific “real-life” context guidance
- The Consultancy Service for Speaking and Listening
- Advisory visits with centre specific feedback
- Reports to centres on the examination series, both centre specific and the Principal Moderators’ general Report to Centres

The Speaking and Listening component has always been a real strength for candidates, as witnessed by moderators making Advisory visits to centres. There is a great deal of good work being done by candidates and this is testimony to the hard work and dedication of the teachers involved in preparing and assessing candidates. Many thanks as always for your continuing commitment.

A652B Spoken Language Study

General Comments

Once again centres are to be commended for the efficiency of their administration. Teachers had taken great care to write detailed and thorough comments on the cover sheets showing how the criteria had been used in arriving at a mark; this was of great use in the moderation process and very much appreciated by the moderators. In a few instances candidate numbers were missing from the cover sheets and this added considerably to the processing time for the centre concerned.

In some cases, centres submitted responses to the tasks set for the 2010-12 sessions, not those set for January and June 2013. **Centres are reminded that it is their responsibility to ensure that the correct tasks are completed as tasks from different sessions may not be accepted.**

Contextualisation of tasks was often highly effective and enabled candidates to meet the assessment objectives and demonstrates their understanding and insight. Centres have clearly followed the guidance provided by OCR and candidates are showing an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the context in which language is used and how this therefore affects language choices.

A1: LANGUAGE OF A PUBLIC FIGURE

(i) A study of a particular speaker

Queen Elizabeth II

Candidates' responses to this task were often thorough and sensitive. They understood and often chose to compare the contexts in which she was talking and how that affected the "image" she needed to project, either as a young monarch in the first televised Christmas broadcast or responding to the very complex issues surrounding the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Candidates paid detailed attention to the language of the texts and how these contributed to the impression made.

Martin Luther King

This was a very popular task and the majority of candidates responded to the "I have a dream" speech. The most successful candidates examined the patterns of language within the speech, discussing how King used references to the Bible and to the Constitution to assume their authority and also discussed the geographical references and how this created a sense of scale.

Many candidates referred to the "returned check" metaphor though some struggled to articulate its significance. Some candidates successfully examined the overall structure of the speech and how the different phases built to the climax at the end. Many were able to discuss how King's delivery contributed to the overall effect without being distracted from the language itself.

Rob Brydon

Candidates studying Rob Brydon tended to respond either to his interviews or to a section of stand-up. The most successful candidates recognised that in the stand-up routine Brydon has created a persona at whom he is poking fun and were able to analyse how this enabled the "real" Brydon to share jokes with the audience. Candidates seem generally more comfortable in discussing the interviews and were often able to discuss how he subverted the traditional celebrity interview form, again creating particular persona.

(ii) A study of a particular interviewer

John Humphrys

In this task, candidates tended to compare Humphrys' interviewing techniques in different types of interview. While they are often able to identify his question types and the difference in tone the analyses would have been stronger if there had been a clear understanding of the contexts in which the interviews took place, for example, on the Today programme he is posing questions on behalf of the listener and the interview is conducted live on air whereas in "On the Ropes" the interview is pre-recorded and edited and seeks to explore and individual's motivations and experiences in order to engage and inform the audience.

While comparison can serve to illuminate understanding, centres should be aware that this is not a requirement of this component and that candidates might benefit from a more detailed study of a single text.

Kirsty Young

Candidates responding to this task often compared to editions of "Desert Island Discs". They recognised that the interview was carefully prepared and considered its structure as well as the questioning strategies and how these contributed to the tone of the interview and enabled interviewees to be open in their responses.

B1: LANGUAGE, MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

(i) A study of the language of the news on TV and/or radio

Candidates made some interesting responses to this task. Some compared the way the use of language has changed on Newsround over time by comparing items from 1982 and 2010. They considered how this affected/ was affected by changing expectations of formality in the relationship established between presenter and audience and also how information was presented in an accessible way.

Other candidates considered the differing presentation of riots in the UK by British news organisations and those in the USA and how the differing use of language created vastly different impressions of events. They discussed how this was appropriate to the different audiences, the dramatization of events being appealing to a distant audience while the more restrained style sought to reassure an audience which was more closely affected by events.

(ii) A study of the spoken language of “The Apprentice”

Candidates engaged with this task very well and produced some very effective analyses, particularly of the dynamics in the ‘Boardroom’. Some candidates refined their responses to focus on how male and female participants responded while others looked at how dominance was established and maintained. The highest performing candidates were highly analytical and sensitive in exploring the fine detail of the texts studied.

B2: LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

A study of the language of the classroom

Centres who set this task took this opportunity to engage candidates with the language around them. Candidates were encouraged to set their own research question and these looked at how teacher language varied according to the age group they were teaching, the number of students they were talking to, the point in the week when they were teaching or the different type of activity being conducted. Candidates then recorded and transcribed the teacher talk before analysing their data. The responses produced were insightful and analytical, and candidates exhibited a clear sense of purpose and ownership of their work.

A680.01 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 produced a range of responses to the reading material: an article on plastic pollution for Question 1 and a leaflet 'Welcome to our magical undersea world' for Question 2. Question 4 was the more popular of the two Writing questions.

The majority of candidates had obviously been well prepared for the examination and schools are increasingly familiar with the format of questions and booklet. The spaces provided for responses were sufficient for all but a minority of candidates, who made use of either the additional pages at the end of the booklet or separate pages attached to the booklet. It was pleasing to see that fewer candidates are using extra pages to respond to Question 2(a). However, there are still excessively long Writing responses, which often start purposefully but failed to sustain the quality over the second, third, fourth and even fifth pages.

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

Some candidates mistakenly commented on headings and photographs in their answer to Q2(b), or used information and language points in Q2(a).

Question 1

1(a) – 1(c)

These easier questions provided a relatively gentle way in to the paper, though not all candidates scored all 6 marks. Question 1(c) proved to be the most difficult for some candidates, who tried to fit 'sea, oil platforms and land' on to the small line provided for the short correct answer 'land'.

1(d)

Stronger responses were clearly focused on the task and were expressed many of the points made in their own words. These candidates showed a secure understanding of the text's content, and used a range of valid points. As in previous sessions, less successful responses were often marked by the presence of one or more of the following:

- points made that were not relevant to the task
- points made at excessive length
- points repeated.

The points most frequently repeated related to creatures feeding on the plastic and as a consequence dying. There was a tendency to copy somewhat slavishly the three points made in the text's final paragraph. Responses in which these points were expressed largely in candidates' own words were generally located in the higher bands.

Some Band 6 responses simply altered occasional words or inverted the sentence structure in the quest for 'own words' – but such approaches tended to work mechanically through the passage, lifting too much of the material. The weakest answers lifted material indiscriminately and showed an almost complete misunderstanding of the task. There were instances of candidates who started by addressing the question but proceeded to give personal views about the topic and even exhortations, unfortunately misplaced, to clean up beaches.

Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. There were fewer candidates this session who had recourse to an extra sheet for Q2(a).

2(a)

Stronger responses always identified specific words or phrases in headings or specific features of photographs or the logo used in the leaflet. The following were some of the features in headings that candidates commented on: the direct address in the title; the superlatives in 'Britain's biggest sharks' and 'longest aquatunnels'; the pun in 'oceans of fun!'; and the rhyme in 'Don't stand in line - book online'. The strongest responses commented on precise effects created by the use of such words and phrases whereas less successful responses tended to make general comments.

The impact of the logo and the different pictures of children and animals were addressed most successfully where candidates identified specific features and made thoughtful comments about the effects created for a reader of this particular leaflet.

Less confident responses tended to make general points about the colourfulness of the pictures and font of the main heading, with vague comments such as 'The colourful pictures draw the reader in' or 'make you feel as if you are there' or 'make you want to go there'. There was also occasionally overly general comment about the purpose of sub-headings ('they tell you what is in the next section').

As ever for this question, selection of some relevant points together with pertinent analytical comment is sufficient to gain all 6 marks for this question. Candidates spending too much time writing on Q2(a) risk under-performing in Q2(b).

2(b)

Successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to select and analyse relevant information points and specific words and phrases which are used to persuade readers that the Blue Planet Aquarium is an enjoyable place for families to visit. The strongest responses considered carefully those parts of the leaflet targeted at parents and those targeted at children. There was reference to the direct address to parents: 'Your children will have a magical time...'

Many candidates explored with at least some success the leaflet's effusive language: 'truly magical', 'amazing range', 'enchanted clown fish', 'spectacular underwater safari', 'teeming with so many fish'. Reference was made, too, to the effect of descriptions such as 'fibre-optic light show synchronised with relaxing chill-out music'.

The ability to consider the effects of language was a discriminator in this question. Less successful responses tended to make a few simple descriptive points about what the Aquarium offered or listed words or phrases from the leaflet without any critical comment.

As recommended in the January 2013 report, candidates would benefit from regular practice at answering Q2(b)-style questions, using both information **and** language points to address the question. They should be mindful that the best responses to language combine short quotation and concise analytical comment.

Section B – Writing

Questions 3 and 4

Examiners saw the full range of performance. Both questions produced writing of high quality that examiners enjoyed reading.

There were, however, too many instances of candidates writing at excessive length in their Writing responses. This was perhaps the result of unsuccessful time management: too little time spent on Section A and too much on Section B. As mentioned in previous reports, length of answer is not a criterion that ensures success. There is no need for candidates to write more than one-and-a-half to two sides of writing (using average size of handwriting as a guide). In this amount of writing they are able to provide more than adequate evidence of an ability to write in an engaging and organised manner. This session there were too many instances of writing which started promisingly but failed to sustain the quality through the whole answer.

The following extract from the January 2013 report remained true of performance in Section B in June 2013: *'stronger responses showed a clear control of the material, and offered an engaging opening, clear development of ideas and an effective ending. Careful consideration was given to choices of vocabulary and sentence structures, and the readers' need for clarity and accuracy was acknowledged. By contrast, less successful responses did not convey much evidence of crafting material for a reader. There was a lack of control of material and, at best, only straightforward development of ideas; sometimes responses had a perfunctory conclusion or ended in mid-air. In general, the greater the length of responses, the more rambling and repetitive they tended to become. The least successful responses contained a level of linguistic error that required examiners to re-read the material to try to make sense of it. Common problems with punctuation included confusion between upper and lower case letters, and a failure to mark sentence divisions.'*

Question 3

This question asked for a 'speech to your class' on the topic 'We must protect the planet for the future'. Stronger responses made it clear from the start that the writing was for a formal speech to their peer group, adapting the material to the requirements of this specific audience.

At the top end, careful arguments were developed with some skill, and with appropriate use of rhetorical devices for effect: questions, repetition, hyperbole and rule of three. Less successful responses tended to repeat the point that the planet must be protected for future generations, but with little detail about how this might be achieved. A minority of responses relied too heavily on the content of the 'Plastic pollution' passage. There was, on balance, less evidence in this session of the use of fanciful statistics.

Question 4

This was a more open-ended question asking for description of 'the place you most like to go to' and an explanation of 'why you like being there'. Stronger responses were able to offer engaging and convincing explanations whereas less successful responses focused mainly on descriptions, often very basic and undeveloped at the bottom of the range. Places included holidays abroad and in the UK, and places closer to home such as the local park, gym or even bedroom. A number of candidates wrote about school, in almost wistful tones as the end of Year 11 approached.

Although no specific audience was specified in the question, the best responses showed a degree of crafting in the writing in a way that acknowledged the presence of a reader. Less successful responses tended to lose focus and control, becoming repetitive and requiring the reader to re-read the material before the meaning became clear.

A680.02 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments

Examiners reported that the paper had been very well received. The candidates engaged with both texts, readily appreciating the quirky humour. The subject matter proved very accessible and, as the BBC brings out a series on food poverty and children's lunchboxes are again under close scrutiny, the ideas presented to the candidates proved contemporary and relevant.

Hardly any candidates omitted to offer a response to each question, certainly not struggling for something to say but rather finding too much, in some cases. Examiners did note an increase in the length of answers this year and generally found that the extra quantity had proved unhelpful, even detrimental, across all questions. It is worth reminding candidates that, although there is now a 24 page answer booklet, there is no intention that candidates should fill it.

All questions on this paper require clearly focused and purposeful writing and any answer that loses sight of the task, loses control or drifts to digression will not score highly. Candidates must also be advised to spend sufficient time on reading the questions and the texts very carefully before they start writing. There was frequent correlation between answers of excessive length and some misunderstanding of text or task.

There were very few instances of rubric error, although a few candidates did try to answer Q3 on the first text. Equally, there were very few instances of candidates entered for the wrong tier, although centres are urged to consider whether those candidates who struggle to get into Band 4 on their Reading questions might be better supported by Foundation tier entry.

Question 1

Although this should be the most straightforward, fact-based question, the concise outline of key points remains the most disappointing. Moreover, failure to assemble relevant facts here seems to be to the detriment of a successful response to question 2. Some candidates are still failing to distinguish between the two tasks and delivered much prepared comment on language features here, in some instances generating a score of zero.

Examiners were pleased to note that in this question the problem of excessive length seems to be diminishing, but now the briefer answers seem to struggle to offer a good range of points. Candidates are still wasting a lot of words giving excess detail and elaboration. It was sufficient to simply identify action-packed TV commercials and web-based, multimedia marketing. Detailed descriptions of each (and quotation of the tweet) were not needed.

It is certainly worth reminding candidates that question 1 will require selection of relevant material; a significant number of candidates tried to summarise the whole article. One significant improvement was noted in that use of 'own words' has become more sensible, although one candidate did tell us that the marketing strategy which intended to appeal to our hearts was out to 'attract us in the cardio-vascular region'.

One potential problem emerging is that examiners saw an increase in the number of candidates offering their answer in the form of bullet points. School are reminded that the mechanical listing of points is a feature of answers below band 5 and that candidates are expected to show their understanding in a well-organised response, with synthesis of relevant points.

Question 2

Having identified the facts about the 'Baby Carrots' campaign strategy in question one, the candidates were then asked to consider how the article presented the 'triumph' of the marketing success. Careful reading of both the text and the question was needed here and some inattentive readers did begin writing with the assumption that the article was somehow part of the campaign and that the writer's 'purpose' was to make us buy carrots.

More thoughtful answers picked up on the structure of the piece and looked at the unfolding success story; the 'before and after' illustrations of the carrot 'makeover'. The Baby Carrots' journey from the 'drawer of death' to their new 'grab-a-bag' status was effectively charted with plenty of good comment on word choice as the carrots moved from 'limp and slimy' associations to become a 'cheeky' and 'fun-loving' vegetable with 'personality'.

There was good attention to pace here with candidates noting the short sentence length in the description of the high-tech, action-packed advertisements. Use of information was handled very well this year with candidates not merely stating the writer uses 'facts to support' but actually exploring how those facts support the idea of success greater than government healthy eating initiatives and that sales went up even during a recession and with more expensive costs.

Careful readers also picked up on the writer's tone and pointed out that his general bewilderment at the strange linking of pterodactyls and carrots, and the bizarre idea that carrots are not a vegetable, emphasised both the creativity of the marketing and the extent to which the advertisers sought to manipulate consumer perceptions. The most able candidates offered incisive comment here.

As in previous sessions, the examiners reported that a considerable number of candidates still come to this examination wanting to off-load a quantity of prepared comment on devices and this is most unhelpful, as it is for question 3 also. The most successful answers will avoid the generic comment on headlines and pictures, making no more than a passing allusion to them as part of a more substantial text-based point. Empty comment on font, columns, positioning of images or colours in images cannot gain credit.

Candidates that can offer no more than description of features should not be taking the higher tier paper. However, examiners did also report that the vague assertions around 'wanting to read on' and 'relateability' are diminishing and this is to be encouraged.

Question 3

Again this needed careful reading and thought before attempting to write a response. Inattentive readers who didn't move much beyond the opening section assumed the article was upholding the 'right to gorge' and omitted consideration of the more subtle points about extension of meaningful choice that were made later. A few candidates substituted their own personal thoughts on diet but these were fewer in number than in previous sessions.

Most candidates made a good attempt to explore the writer's tone and it was pleasing to see greater flexibility here. Whilst weaker students still confined themselves to assertions of 'negative' and 'informal' most tried to connect language choice with content and did show quite secure understanding of how the writer was covering a serious topic in a deceptively light style. The conversational format was noted and generally explored with suitable examples, although examiners did report unhelpful use of an increasingly popular 'formula' point on the use of personal pronouns. It is not useful to simply quote 'I' or 'you' and then to assert a deep and meaningful bond has been formed.

However, there was awareness at most levels that the tone shifts and the most able candidates were able to explore the way the writer establishes jovial bonhomie as a way of making the reader more receptive to his point of view. In one striking answer a candidate described this as 'creating a neo-Falstaffian persona' to disguise the 'dangerously radical' policy of subsidised food.

Something that was clearly evident from this year's responses is that the 'paragraph by paragraph' style of commentary and indeed 'the device by device' listing approach proves most unhelpful. These responses were fragmented and comment was decontextualised. It is very important that candidates can show that they have whole text overview in their responses to reading texts.

Question 4

Candidates had plenty to write about their school lunches, indeed as one candidate said, “I welcome the opportunity to let out five years’ worth of pent-up anguish and frustration.”

For this style of response, adapting tone to the designated audience is crucial and the best letters managed a subtly-persuasive tone which remained conscious of the head teacher’s status often with an eye to the school’s perceived priorities of achieving exam targets, saving money and achieving Healthy Eating status. Some candidates did not address the letter appropriately (one candidate beginning, ‘To my rubbish, so-called headmaster’). Examiners were amused to see to see the relationships between students and principals varied from very close first names terms to ‘Dear Sir or Madam’.

Generally the letter format did help to curtail unnecessary length, although examiners did experience some dismay when the letter moved into, “On Monday we would have...” format. Most letters began strongly but did not always end effectively. Candidates should be encouraged to put equal thought into a suitable ‘rounding-off’ paragraph to complete these tasks – although **not** the type of conclusion that simply re-states previous content points.

As ever, candidates were witty, insightful, pragmatic, and schools might be well-advised to listen to some of their suggestions. Impassioned pleas for more variety, more cultural awareness and generally more civilised dining experiences were made; ‘we should all serve each other at the table and take long enough over our meals to hold a conversation’. Despondent descriptions of the daily reality conveyed shared themes; nowhere to sit, long queues and ‘by the time I get there the only filling left is tuna mush.’

Question 5

This generated some of the strongest responses with many being a genuine pleasure to read. This question was generally answered well, with some truly heart-wrenching tales of personal struggle and difficulty. A heavy reliance on school-based themes, options and sixth form, was expected and these choices were well-represented, often delivered effectively, but candidates also surprised us with their inventiveness.

Themes ranged from choosing to seek help for depression, anorexia, bullying, to choosing which parent to live with after a break-up. For some, the question seemed to be an act of catharsis and it was a poignant reminder of the pressures some children are under at school and at home. Other responses, equally compelling, were very entertaining and some students were able to write with flair and sophistication on, for example, creating their new image, trying out a new sport, selecting the family pet - “It’s like choosing a brother, you see.”

Some responses were a little over-ambitious here, too tied up in complex plots and narratives so that they were very long and lost control, often with a rushed ending and sometimes not actually getting to the moment of decision. As always with A680, clear focus in a well-structured piece of writing is what is required.

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