

GCSE

English Language

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J355**

OCR Report to Centres June 2014

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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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A640 Speaking and Listening

General comments

This was the first session with Speaking and Listening as a separately endorsed unit, no longer forming 20% of the final GCSE grade in English or English Language. Although some centres have experienced some confusion with the new status of the unit, the vast majority were aware that in terms of the teaching, assessment and administration of the unit very little has changed as explained below:

- Units A652a and A643 are now a single unit A640
- Band 5 is now the top band, but the descriptors and mark ranges remain the same.
- The unit is now common across GCSE English Language and GCSE English, involving common mark sheets and a single moderation process.
- Advisory visits will continue to take place every three years, or more often if a centre needs extra support.
- The administration of the moderation process remains the same with centres selecting their own samples (7 per teaching group) and sending them to the moderator with other required documentation.

For this series, where possible, one moderator was responsible for both A640, Speaking and Listening, and A650, Spoken Language, 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 previous filmed footage, there was a complete range of activities across all three contexts, but which gave specific support to the “real-life” context and task setting. Two areas identified as being problematic for some centres.

A large number of advisory visits have been carried out this year. Initially there was some confusion about whether centres still had to assess Speaking and Listening, but this was confirmed early in the year and the majority of centres were very welcoming and pleased to receive advice and support.

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. Giving candidates the freedom to choose, for example, the subject matter of a presentation for the Individual Extended Contribution, may lead to under-performance. So using examples from this series, a presentation on “Is Space Travel an unnecessary luxury when people in the world are starving?” allows achievement in the higher bands; a talk on “My Work Experience”, with no appropriate focus, is unlikely to lead to Band 5 marks.

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. It is difficult to say whether centres are not taking this requirement seriously and if so, are opting out of their responsibilities to ensure that it is covered, or whether it simply is a matter of not understanding what is required. With the support available the latter seems increasingly unlikely. Often individual teachers do not fulfil this requirement in a centre where the rest of the department is secure with its demands. It is essential that all teachers preparing candidates for this unit are required to watch the filmed footage, where the RLC is explained very fully.

The requirement that one of the basic three contexts must address this aspect is not onerous or difficult to comprehend. 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”. So a prepared talk delivered by the candidate, 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. If the candidate is given a clear role and purpose, for example as a charity representative, the talk would move ‘beyond the classroom’.

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 can never 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 for example, are not appropriate for this component, where the emphasis is always on Speaking and Listening.

Similarly, performing a scene 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 A650 Spoken Language study, remains surprisingly small. Successful tasks linked studies of the language of cookery programmes to candidates presenting their own cookery programme.

Reference has been made to the support available as regards task setting for all aspects of Speaking and Listening. The tasks illustrated on DVDs issued and online filmed footage should 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 data base of marks for candidates, with written comments. These procedures, good practice in centres, help to prevent problems arising from staff absences or changes of staff. It also helps 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. It is also not acceptable for candidates to write comments on the Controlled Assessment Forms.

Typical lack of detail in description would be "a talk to the class" or "a group discussion on 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, 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 some teachers providing detailed, helpful and pertinent comments on candidates, and others 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 transcriptional errors.

Thankfully the majority of centres provided all the necessary information, with well-presented records, increasingly word processed in part and wholly. However the one "rogue" teacher can undo the efficient hard work of a department.

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. It must be noted also that the sole intended audience for comments is the external moderator, so comments of encouragement are inappropriate: "Really well done" or "Excellent, an effective role".

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 odd mistakes were discovered by moderators.

Importantly no assumption should be made as to a link between bands and the level awarded.

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, but 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, some centres professing to having watched the DVDs/filmed footage went on to get the "real-life" context wrong. Also centres are warned against using out of date, old material from previous specifications. No material has been issued on video for this specification, yet some centres claimed to have watched one.

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

Despite building a session on administration into the Advisory Visit, and including administration instructions on the filmed footage, there is still a great deal of confusion about how this unit is moderated.

There was an issue where centres, through no fault of their own, sent their documentation to Cambridge Assessment rather than a specified moderator. Some of this documentation took time to track down, or was lost, and OCR apologises to the centres affected in this way.

However, even where centres had the correct moderator address labels, moderators have reported centres being weeks late in sending all the relevant material, with no explanation or apology forthcoming. In some instances, thankfully a small number, moderators have received negative reactions, when legitimately asking for moderation material. It is in the interests of all parties that deadlines are kept assiduously, and that candidates' results are not put in jeopardy.

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, the sample is centre selected, unlike all other CAs.

However even though one moderator is involved, centres should keep the two units separate: A640 Speaking and Listening and A650 Spoken Language. The moderation material should be presented in an easily identifiable form. Much time consuming, needless 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 and in the accompanying commentary.

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.

However grateful thanks are given to all those who got it right and enable moderators to meet their deadlines.

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 - 2012-13 and 2013-14
- Specific “real-life” context guidance document
- 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 Administration procedures have been summarised previously.

Finally the Speaking and Listening Unit 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 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.

A650 Spoken Language

General comments

Once again, moderators commented on the high standard of work produced for this component, and particularly on the evident engagement of candidates with the text and tasks. Centres are often ambitious in the challenge they present to candidates and candidates often respond by producing work that is well beyond the demands of the GCSE.

Administration

In the vast majority of cases, Centres managed the administration of this component very efficiently sending the work samples promptly and presenting them clearly. Moderators were appreciative of Centres who included transcripts of the texts which had been studied and the notes which candidates used during the final assessment. It is of great help to the moderator when the CAFs are completed fully, with the candidate number and when, after internal standardisation, the final mark awarded is clear.

Task setting and contextualisation

For all topics, it was very clear that candidates responded more successfully when the task was clearly defined, rather than specified simply as "A Study of ...". Particularly successful were tasks which encouraged candidates to look at how language is used for a particular purpose. For example, candidates asked to consider how Obama uses language to justify in the speech on the death of Bin Laden often discussed the contrast between his emotive description of the effects of 9/11 with the more clinical and depersonalised description of the operation, and the switch from the second person plural to the first person singular as he moves from identifying a common goal to presenting himself as a strong leader. Considering the instructional styles of various TV chefs often resulted in candidates comparing, for example, the type of imperatives and quantifiers used by different chefs and their use of modals.

Some Centres chose to compare texts and while this is not a requirement of this component, it can be helpful to candidates in illuminating the choices made. In some cases this was very successful, often where able candidates had a secure and at times subtle understanding of the varying contexts. Where it was less successful, candidates were comparing texts which were either too different for them to make useful comparisons, or where the contexts were too similar; at times, candidates were struggling to cover a great deal of material and did so at the expense of the depth of their analysis. It would be perfectly valid for a Centre to use comparison as an approach to teaching, for example, looking at a range of different types of interview, and then to use a single text for the final assessment.

Characteristics of weaker and stronger responses

The most successful responses were those where candidates had a good understanding of the contexts and purposes of the texts and were therefore able to consider how language had been chosen to meet these purposes. They were able to comment precisely on the effects of particular language choices and how they achieved the purpose, for example, some commented on Obama's apparently spontaneous anecdotes in his speeches, making him sound 'natural', alongside the more prepared sections in interviews where his use of statistics and well-structured language showed him as a serious politician as well as a 'regular guy' who could engage with the electorate. Others commented on Paxman's repetition of questions to demonstrate the interviewee's reluctance to give a straight answer.

Successful candidates also showed an understanding of the structure of texts, particularly when dealing with longer speeches, how they progressed towards a conclusion and how language choices varied accordingly.

Where tasks lacked clear focus, candidates were more likely to adopt a 'feature spotting' approach where examples of devices, typically lists of three, anaphora, figurative language, or closed and open questions etc. were listed. Because candidates were then dealing with a group of examples, often from different parts of a text, their opportunity to comment analytically and sensitively on the choice of language was restricted and their points were consequently often superficial and repetitive.

Application of the marking criteria

The majority of Centres applied the marking criteria accurately. Many supported their marks with detailed, analytical comments which appropriately addressed the criteria and coupled it with comments on how the candidate had met those criteria. There were many Centres whose marginal annotations of work were sparing but purposeful and not simply couched in the terms of the Band Descriptors; these annotations reflected a genuine understanding of what the individual candidate was trying to achieve and usually were to be found on the work of candidates who were pursuing a genuine line of thought or argument.

Where moderators disagreed with Centre marks, the most common disparity was in what constituted 'analytical understanding', perception or cogency. In these instances, simple or descriptive comments were often praised as 'shows analytical understanding'.

Many Centres' samples showed evidence of internal standardisation and in the most effective of these moderators saw annotations and comments by more than one teacher. While presenting evidence of this sort is not required, it is vital that all teachers in a Centre are applying the marking criteria consistently in order to establish a single, valid rank order.

A651 Extended Literary Text and Imaginative Writing

General Comments

Tasks, Texts and Responses

The central band four- six descriptor is “understands and demonstrates how meaning is conveyed”. In band three 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, in so far that they can talk about language and structure throughout the piece: rather than focusing exclusively on the former.

Long narrative recapitulations should be avoided: they will not gain a great deal of credit. Neither will responses that insist on including passages on the alleged social, historical and cultural context of the work, which is not asked for and not tested in this Unit (and see below).

Themed Tasks

There were few takers for these. A number of candidates wrote about Curley’s wife as a challenger of conventions and most did so very well, being less encumbered by the constraints set out below. They managed to see the inner promptings that drive her behaviour and the ironies of her death and its aftermath. One centre presented uniformly excellent work on “Pride and Prejudice” with analyses of deceit and hypocrisy’. There was much to enjoy in what was (mainly) written about Collins, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Wickham and Caroline Bingley.

William Shakespeare:

“Romeo and Juliet”.

“How does Shakespeare show the impact of the violent atmosphere in Verona on the love story?”

It was pleasing to see a significant number of very successful responses to this task and text, which was rapidly abbreviated to “Violence in Verona”. Candidates made strong and fruitful links between the “death marked love” noted by the Chorus at the outset and the inevitable consequences of the clash between the Montague and Capulet families. Others focused on the ways in which killing Tybalt tears Romeo between loving Juliet and sticking up for family honour. Even stronger responses saw that there is a symbiosis between the secrecy of the affair and the very public nature of the violence, which compounds and accelerates the rush to death and destruction. However they did it candidates demonstrated clearly that this is a play in which violence: physical, intellectual and emotional and many more ways, is at centre stage almost throughout.

“Julius Caesar”

It was pleasing to see that at last centres have turned to this much underestimated work.

Candidates answering on this task need to see that there are two discrete parts to it. First how are the plebeians presented? And secondly, how do different characters treat them? Some candidates didn’t do as well as they might have done because they didn’t respond to both parts of the task. There is plenty to say about how they are presented in 1/1 and 1/ 2 as well as 3/3. Then there are a variety of contrasts to make between the treatment they receive from different characters in those scenes. Too few candidates really milked the huge amount there is to say about the ways Brutus and Anthony behave and speak in the latter scene.

John Steinbeck "Of Mice and Men"

"How does Steinbeck show the power of dreams and dreaming in the novel?"

There were some very good responses to this and even the less impressive were still very solid and workmanlike. The best responses were able to see and demonstrate the essential ephemerality of a dream: that it could seem palpable, intoxicating and very enticing but then disappear with a cold touch of reality. Hence a lot of candidates started with the closing scenes of Lennie's killing of Curley's wife, the varied reactions to it (especially Candy's reaction) and the concluding scene of George shooting Lennie as he gives his final rendition of "livin' off the fatta the lan". They were then able to trace the strands of the dream back via an examination of some of the characters: Curley's wife's dreams of stardom, Candy's dreams of security in his old age etc. Stronger responses took an overview of the inevitability of the eventual bursting of the dream bubble and compared the hopes and aspirations of different characters. There was much good work on Crooks. One particularly perceptive piece saw interesting similarities between Lennie and Crooks and developed them to their respective "dream" conclusions.

Less successful responses tended to work the other way round: starting at the beginning and falling into the trap of ploughing through a lot of narrative recapitulation to get to the end of the story. Fewer responses limited themselves by persistent references to context: in this case essays on the "American Dream". Such accounts differed massively in what they alleged this might or might not have been.

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 yet again 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 little 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 women as presented in the text and link that to the way their loneliness shapes the double standards. Candidates still became confused over where Curley's wife, who was rightly seen as the central female character, fitted.

Jane Austen "Pride and Prejudice".

The work on this text submitted by the few centres who had studied it was excellent: little comment is needed beyond a confirmation that this text **is** within the compass of GCSE candidates given that the right approaches are taken. And see work on the themed tasks above.

Athol Fugard "Tsotsi"

This text is not widely presented but is done so with great passion and commitment by those who choose it.

The task proved a successful one: candidates responded well to making and developing links between the description of the Sophia township in all its dilapidation and raw, primitive facilities and the ways in which Tsotsi and others respond to it in the ways they think, feel and act. It was pleasing to see candidates with an overview of Tsotsi/David and his parents.

Work on Bill Bryson or Kate Adie was not seen in this session. More pleasingly there was some work on the Hardy short stories completed with great skill and enthusiasm.

Wilfred Owen: "Explore the ways in which Owen presents differing responses to the experience of war in two or three of his poems."

Candidates had been very well prepared on Owen, who is, presumably, also a writer of choice for English Literature. Work focussed on the traditionally more popular pieces in the Anthology: "Mental Cases" and "Disabled" (obviously a very good choice here); "Dulce et Decorum" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth". There was some more adventurous work on "Exposure" and "Spring Offensive" but few of the other poems were included.

Simon Armitage

Candidates readily identified different kinds of poverty, both the literal and non literal and wrote about them with the confidence we are accustomed to seeing on this writer.

Carol Ann Duffy

Similarly, Duffy remains a very popular choice and the challenge of writing about the world of dreams and the imagination was no deterrent to good work.

Benjamin Zephaniah: to date very little has been seen on this writer, unfortunately.

Personal and Imaginative Writing/Prose Fiction

Almost all candidates in this session chose "The Victims". It was pleasing to see that most if not all related this prompt to personal experience and did not go for a derivatively received disaster movie or bloody military melodrama or something of the sort. Those who did choose to write at second hand often limited the band their work could be placed in. The satellite task was most often the obituary. The better work did more than repeat the events of the core task in a different (or even the same) voice. Strong responses had fairly obviously studied and noted the structure, pithy concision and third party objectivity of a good obituary column and sought to emulate that.

Fewer chose "hopes and ambitions for the future" but those that did wrote with great engagement and in some well researched detail. The most popular choice of satellite task was "ideals for the world in ten years' time". Again these featured carefully structured work and a passionate sense of the need to reform and move forward to a better, fairer world not only in their own lives and experience but also almost always on a global scale as well.

Centres and teachers are to be congratulated on steering candidates in directions that often displayed compassion, sympathy and awe in convincing and authentic detail.

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 very 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. Those few centres who were unable to do this, most often by marking too generously rather than misunderstanding the rank order of their candidates will have been notified in the individual centre report.

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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.

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 co-operation.

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. Most candidates were able to engage with the reading material for Section A: about the use of mobile phones on planes and trains (in Text A) and an article about a coffee trader who banned the use of mobile phones in his shop (in Text B). The first of the Writing tasks was the more popular of the two.

The majority of candidates appeared to have been 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 (very often unnecessarily) separate pages attached to the booklet. There was a more significant minority of candidates this session who were not fully clear about the different requirements of Questions 1 and 2. Perhaps this was at least in part attributable to the absence of a January module. In a unitised system of assessment, it was possible for candidates to perform at a higher standard in units they re-sat.

In most cases, candidates appeared to have followed the advice regarding time allocation; few responses showed evidence of running out of time. However, some candidates did themselves no favours by rushing through the Reading questions and padding out their Writing responses until the invigilator signalled the end of the examination.

Individual Questions Section A – Reading

No examiners reported any instances of candidates using the incorrect text for Q1, but once again a few candidates used the first text to answer either Q2(a) or Q2(b). These candidates appeared to have little familiarity with the format of the paper.

1(a) – 1(c) These easier questions provide a relatively gentle way in to the paper, though not all candidates scored all 6 marks. Each of the two sub-questions for Q1(a) asked for one-word answers, which most candidates acknowledged.

1(d) Stronger responses demonstrated a clear focus on the task and were able to show evidence of expressing points in their own words – ‘as far as possible’, as the question demands. These candidates showed a secure understanding of the text across a number of valid points.

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
- own views offered.

Better answers addressed both elements of the question and made a clear distinction between the writer’s views and other people’s views. In general, less successful answers tended to write about views generally and often introduced views of their own.

Use of own words is a discriminator in this question. Some candidates misinterpreted this requirement, mistakenly thinking that it was sufficient to alter the occasional word. This led to a very mechanical approach, as candidates worked doggedly through the passage rather than addressing the question in a focused way.

The weakest answers lifted material indiscriminately and showed an almost complete misunderstanding of the task.

Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. There was still, however, a minority of candidates who wrote at excessive length for Q2(a).

2(a) Stronger responses commented on the precise effect of such features as the rhetorical question and answer in the heading, the sub-heads 'True champion' and 'Mindless chit-chat', and the phrase 'banned bad manners' in the words beneath the picture. Most candidates wrote about the effects of the smiling coffee trader and the sign outlining the no mobile phones policy in the photograph.

Less successful responses merely identified features without comment or made generic comments about headings, photographs and captions that could be true of any newspaper article, or indeed, of any media text. Once again, examiners were informed in very general terms that headings 'make you want to read on' and were in big, bold fonts in black against a white background. In such responses, photographs inevitably 'drew the reader in' and 'made you want to read on'. There was very little merit in superficial points of this kind.

As with Q2(b), the space provided for the answer provides guidance to candidates about a suitable length for their response. 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) risked under-performing in Q2(b).

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. It should be noted that the quality of analytical comment is a discriminator in this question. Stronger responses explored the words used to describe the rudeness of customers: 'mouthing their orders', 'jabbering', 'never so much as glanced', 'too wrapped up in their own conversations'. The strength of the writer's views was evident in his comment on the 'curse' of the mobile phone and the sarcasm in 'basic human right to hold two conversations at once, while tweeting with their spare hand'.

However, many responses did not address aspects of language used in the article. Weaker responses simply described the content of the passage, and some candidates who did not read carefully confused the writer with the coffee-trader subject of the article.

Candidates would benefit from regular practice at answering Q2(b)-style questions, using both information **and** language points to address the question. Practice at reading carefully and purposefully would help to lift the performance of the weakest candidates.

Section B – Writing Questions 3 and 4

Examiners saw the full range of performance.

It was pleasing to see the time and effort taken by some candidates in their planning, with mind maps again popular.

Once again, it is worth pointing out that length of answer alone rarely secures high reward. There simply 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). Some candidates perhaps feel the need to write until the very end of the examination – but they would be better advised to spend five minutes or so checking their work for basic errors. There should be no need to use supplementary pages, which are very rarely an indicator of strong performance. Excessively long writing responses are usually testimony to poor time management across the paper.

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 impeded communication.

Common problems with punctuation included confusion between upper and lower case letters, and a failure to mark sentence divisions. There were also instances of very poor handwriting, as if candidates were unaware of the needs (or indeed existence) of a reader.

Question 3

Candidates engaged in a lively way with the prompt 'Teenagers these days just don't know how to behave'. Many agreed and provided colourful catalogues of teenage misbehaviour by way of illustration. Others reminded the oldies that they too had once been young and had perhaps themselves misbehaved long ago in the mists of time. Heart-warming stories of young people contributing to charities abounded.

Question 4

There was a wide range of engaging responses to the topic 'Life isn't fair'. Stronger responses adopted a more philosophical approach. In the middle of the range there were some interesting catalogues of woe pertaining to candidates' own lives. Towards the bottom of the range, writing tended to be repetitive, with one or two main points not adequately or engagingly developed.

A680 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments

Although there was less humour in this year's paper, examiners reported that it had been well-received. Candidates found the focus on animal rights and environmental issues readily accessible and the subject matter also proved rather contemporary, in the light of recently revived interest in Britain's whaling history. Candidates throughout the ability range found material for comment in each of the given texts and misunderstanding was rare. The contrasts between the passages were very effective in helping candidates differentiate the skill sets each question required: language and presentation in the first and language and tone in the second. Few candidates were side-tracked either in the reading or the writing by the inclusion of extraneous material of their own, which did not relate directly to the tasks. Both writing tasks offered a wide canvas for expression of a range of views and experiences. Rubric error was rare, with only a few instances of candidates writing on the wrong text or attempting to cover both writing tasks. Very few candidates failed to complete the paper and this does suggest that centres are, once again, making sound judgements on tier entry, with only a few exceptions.

Comments on Individual Questions

Question No. 1

The most secure answers showed clear understanding of both the text and the task through careful selection of relevant points and avoided the introduction of excess detail, in the form of examples and quotations. Candidates earning the highest marks had very precise focus on the question and understood that a summary was required, delivering each point of relevant information in a pithy phrase or sentence. As an example, most candidates mentioned 'whale watching'; here the point needed was that tourism made better economic sense than commercial whaling - not just that whale tourism existed. Likewise, stronger answers made clear that human activity provided additional threats to whale numbers, over and above the threat of whaling and avoided simply enumerating and detailing what those environmental factors were. Higher scoring candidates also resisted the temptation to summarise the whole extract, omitting comment on the emotional quality of the ex-whaler's personal testimony, for example, and rightly reserving that for Q2. Consistent use of own words is an important requirement here and the best answers avoided lifting phrases and statistics from the text, again saving that material for Q2. It will never be appropriate to quote in a response to Q1.

Although previous sessions have seen some improvement in awareness of the need to write concisely, examiners did report that this had not been sustained in this session, with some candidates prioritising number of points over selection and synthesis. What is omitted (e.g. the "whaler's testimony") is as important as what is included. Here, at the start of the examination, there is a temptation to explain and repeat points at great length, which means that marks are lost when concision is not even attempted. The highest scoring candidates work hard on organising their responses to Q1 and eliminate excess detail and repetition at the planning stage.

Question No. 2

The text from Greenpeace had the clear intention to influence opinion and generate reader response. Most candidates could appreciate this at some level and the best answers rose above the conventional, formulaic notions that the text simply delivered information. The best answers took the deceit, greed and self-interest of the whalers as the core of responses which clearly analysed the article's substantiation of this and then went on to look at the ways in which Greenpeace presented its virtuous and crusading "truth telling" self.

There was a good balance between comment on presentational features and comment on language use, with more candidates prepared to engage with the text and not merely to describe the images and headings. Where there was comment on the image, this was linked to the text, saying that the picture illustrates the beautiful animal which is under threat and that this image is kept in the reader's mind as they digest the statistics which expose the dire plight of the whales. Quotation of facts and statistics was a popular way into the response with the best answers taking time to consider what was in this information that supported the Greenpeace argument. The redundant generic point that 'it shows they know what they are talking about' is still with us but is becoming less frequent.

The text offered plenty of examples where language was used to create effects. The better responses offered detailed reference to the text and were able to not only identify a device such as alliteration, for example, but were able to set this in context and explore what was added to the overall impact of the text. Again, with regard to generic points, better candidates looked at word choice in 'consumption, contamination and catastrophe'; not just resting with 'alliteration engages us and makes us read on'. Candidates wrote well on the emotive language in the personal testimony, drawing together the mention of 'blood money' with the title word 'greed' and the subtle suggestion that only people stuck in the past who have not 'moved on' to a more enlightened view of animal rights would support whaling. Thoughtful attention to use of language is essential for access to the top bands and this must move beyond merely naming and defining a device.

Consideration of how the text was structured was a feature of the top answers, with clear-sighted understanding of how each 'myth' is built up to be knocked down and then leave the reader feeling betrayed by lies. The progression from threat of extinction to new hope and from polluted seas to fresh appreciation of the marine environment was another good way into the text.

Question No.3

This was not an easy text and examiners were pleased to note some good quality responses here, in some cases stronger than for Q2, with less generic comment and candidates working hard to understand Fry's attitudes at various stages of his experience. Virtually all candidates could access the text at the simple level that Fry did not want to witness a whale hunt and could identify features of language use which supported communication of his view. Most candidates could identify a difference in tone as he moves from Nantucket to Barrow and Captain Henry proved to be an engaging character. There was some subtle comment on how Fry manages to make the 'boundless enthusiasm' of Philbrick unattractive through his interruptions but makes the 'bouncy and boisterous' nature of Henry's family more appealing.

Fry's respect for the Eskimo came across clearly and candidates wrote well on this, drawing out the background details relating to the freezing temperatures, the size of the boat and the weight of the whale gun. Candidates showed great sympathy for the need to eat all the 'nasty bits' of the whale. Candidates found it less straightforward to define Fry's attitude to Philbrick's views and this proved to be a good discriminator. The most able candidates were able to live with ambiguity here and to explore, for example, the use of contrasts and ironies, looking at how the centre of the 'slaughter' was now 'neat' and 'pretty' and that the conversation between Fry and Philbrick takes place in the shadow of a whale skeleton, for example. Although there was a little confusion at times over which man was speaking, most candidates tried to take on board Philbrick's argument that modern man destroys species in the search for fuel and to gauge Fry's response here. His ironical comment on his mode of transport leaving Nantucket was used to good effect.

There were some highly perceptive responses that linked Barrow and Nantucket through the theme of ancestry, exploring Henry's respect for his ancestors and his belief in continuity set against Fry's distaste for a 'grisly' past and the concern, planted by Philbrick, that future generations will judge us harshly. I applaud the one candidate who did identify the closing comment as an echo of the line attributed to Admiral Lord Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen, 'I see no ships.' Centres should be assured that this did not form part of the assessment.

Question No. 4

This was by far the most popular choice and delivered some excellent pieces of writing. The question did require candidates to adopt a given format, either a personal diary or an online blog and the best answers maintained awareness of that format throughout, not simply writing 'Dear Diary' or 'Hi Bloggers' at the top of a piece of creative writing, sometimes as an afterthought. Awareness of the imagined audience was a feature of the more successful responses and it is worth reminding candidates that, in addition to their imaginary audience, they have the real audience of their examiner and that more casual language, slang and expletives are not appropriate in the context of a public examination and do not display the candidates' language skills to best advantage. Those candidates that kept focus on the task delivered some powerful commentaries on personal, life-changing experiences. Examiners reported that the format was a great success, even when it was used as a start to a piece of narrative, mostly because it enabled candidates to find a specific subject and get straight into a tone and mood with which they felt comfortable and confident.

Choice of subject matter was wide ranging. Meeting inspirational sporting figures and celebrities featured occasionally but more frequent were moving accounts of encounters with people dealing with adversity in their everyday life. There were blood-curdling moments of conversions to vegetarianism and powerful descriptions of turning both to and away from religious belief. Centres might be interested to learn that lessons learned from guest speakers at assemblies featured often; Holocaust survivors, Second World War veterans and Red Cross volunteers have all had great impact on our candidates. Teachers were not forgotten either and many candidates poured out heartfelt thanks to the teachers who had turned their lives around. Travel experiences featured frequently, with school exchange visits, charity projects and often just holidays with family and friends providing food for thought. Blogging was often the format of choice here and it is evident that Trip Advisor is having some influence on candidates' writing styles as candidates indicated how real life experience of various resorts had made them 'change their mind' about a variety of destinations. In terms of the AO3iii mark, the most common issues for this question were with tense agreement and the use of correctly punctuated direct speech.

Question No. 5

There were fewer responses to this task but it was often the choice of the more able candidates who offered some highly philosophical and often tightly argued statements of belief. The best responses were very well organised with clear lines of development. Those candidates who began writing without forethought, in a 'stream of consciousness' style, generally lost their way and either stopped very short or went on repeating themselves, hence denying any developmental structure to what they wrote. Good paragraphing skills were essential and examiners were pleased to note some improvement here, particularly in the making of logical connections between paragraphs, which is very important in a task of this nature.

Examiners were happy to accept all views, whether based on personal experience or global events and it is worth noting the importance of having some content in these ideas-based tasks. The use of a well-chosen anecdote or example enhanced a piece very effectively, however, it has been a common theme of this paper that 'less is more' and a few carefully selected references were often more striking than attempts at world history digest. (Understanding of the causes of the Second World War was assessed in another exam.) It is worth encouraging candidates to look at the overall coherence and tone of their essays. The best pieces avoided the sometimes uncomfortable pairing of significant, important matters with the mundane and trivial. Quotations from such figures as Einstein and Mahatma Ghandi reinforced the candidates' points very effectively but perhaps should not have been set alongside the words of the wise turtle from *Kung Fu Panda*. In terms of the AO3iii mark, the most significant issue was with sentence structure. Candidates were trying to express some complex ideas in this task and lengthy, unpunctuated sentences did not support clear delivery of the viewpoint.

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