

GCSE

English Language

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J355**

OCR Report to Centres November 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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A650 Spoken Language

General comments

As was to be expected for a retake session, there was a very small entry in which most candidates responded to the Language of a Public Figure: Obama.

Once again, centres are to be commended on the efficiency of their administration. Most candidates were able to identify rhetorical devices used and make general comments on them. Where candidates had been given a carefully focused task e.g. 'How does Obama choose language and structures to justify his actions' candidates were able to make more specific and analytical comments. Some candidates showed a secure understanding of the contents of the speeches and of the contexts in which they were made. This enabled them to analyse how language was chosen to achieve specific outcomes and therefore access the criteria of the higher bands.

In the majority of cases, teachers had clearly understood OCR's standards and awarded marks accordingly, making detailed and effective comments to show how they had arrived at their decision. This is of great help in the moderation and OCR is very grateful for their diligence.

A651 Extended Literary Text and Imaginative Writing

General Comments Tasks, Texts and Responses

Most of the report for the summer session applies here equally.

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, and responses that include passages on the social, historical and cultural context of the work, which is not a requirement for 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 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.

William Shakespeare: “Romeo and Juliet”.

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

Candidates continued to make 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.

John Steinbeck “Of Mice and Men”

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

As always, 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 considerably 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. It is worth mentioning again, that references to Social/Cultural/Historical context are not a requirement for this unit. 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.

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.

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. 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. The centres offering Armitage in this session had obviously spent a significant time and effort in preparing candidates for what they were facing.

Carol Ann Duffy

Similarly, Duffy remained a very popular choice and the challenge of writing about the world of dreams and the imagination was no deterrent to good work. Again much effort had been put into preparing candidates thoroughly for this in this session.

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

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.

A 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 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 cooperation.

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 achievements of pilot Amy Johnson (in Text A) and an article about the achievement and determination of Jessica Ennis in the 2012 Olympics (in Text B). The two optional Writing tasks proved to be equally popular.

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 hurried through the Reading questions and spent an excessive amount of time on the Writing question which led in some cases to rambling, unshaped Section B answers.

Individual Questions Section A – Reading

1(a) – 1(c) As in previous sessions, these easier questions provided a relatively gentle way in to the paper, though not all candidates scored all 6 marks. In particular, the 1(c) question on ‘physical effects’ of the solo flight on Amy Johnson was found challenging by a number of candidates.

1(d) Strong 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.

Candidates achieved higher marks when they addressed both elements of the question and made a clear distinction between Amy Johnson’s achievements and people’s attitudes towards her. In general, less successful answers tended to write about views generally and often introduced views of their own. Some candidates misinterpreted the requirements of the question and commented on the effects of particular words.

Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. A minority of candidates wrote at excessive length for Q2(a), the stronger answers tended to be more focused and less repetitive.

2(a) Stronger responses commented on the precise effect of presentational features. Less successful responses 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. Some candidates made general terms that headings ‘make you want to read on’ and that the photograph was related to the topic of the article (and that it was big and colourful).

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 celebrate Jessica Ennis’s achievements and determination. She gave a ‘dazzling performance’, was a ‘show-stopper’, was ‘roared on’ by the crowd and ‘exploded’ to the finishing line etc.

Some candidates did not fully understand the requirements of the question and therefore did not explore aspects of language used in the article. A few responses simply described the content of the passage.

Section B – Writing Questions 3 and 4

The following extract from the June 2014 Report still holds true:

‘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.

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 conveyed little evidence of crafting material for a reader. There was a lack of control of material and straightforward development of ideas; sometimes responses had a perfunctory conclusion. Generally, the greater the length of responses, the more rambling and repetitive they tended to become..’

The most common punctuation error was the use of full stops , there were some instances of paragraphs containing only one full stop at the end. Some answers contained evidence of accurate use of upper and lower case letters and proper nouns beginning with a capital letter.

Question 3

Candidates wrote engagingly about those close to them and also about more public figures. Among the former, parents and grandparents predominated; among the latter, footballers.

Question 4

Some candidates revealed some uncertainty about what constitutes a letter, and wrote instead articles or the text for a speech to their class. Most answers were against the idea of shorter summer breaks, arguing that pupils, teachers and caretakers deserved a break after a gruelling academic year of worksheets, homeworks, controlled assessments, mock exams and interventions.

A680 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments:

This November session saw relatively low candidate numbers but produced some very secure scripts with strong performance in the Section B Writing and improved performance in Section A Reading. It was evident that candidates had worked hard to improve their understanding of the approach to each of the three reading questions and responses were often full and purposeful.

Candidates found the subject matter of the paper familiar and accessible at all levels of the ability range. There was particularly strong personal response to the quite hard-hitting content of the John Healey piece and candidates wrote thoughtfully and with some maturity here, often taking material from this text into their writing responses to Question 4 and using it to good effect. Rubric error was minimal, with very few candidates writing on the wrong text or attempting to cover both writing tasks. Virtually all candidates completed the paper and, for the first time in the life of this paper, Higher tier had a smaller entry than Foundation tier, demonstrating that centres are supporting their candidates effectively by making sound judgements on tier entry.

Examiners were pleased to note improved legibility of scripts and it was evident that candidates were thinking not only about 'presentation' in the texts but also about how they should present their own answers to the examiner. It is a small but important point, now that scripts are read on a screen, that answers need to be very clearly numbered and the examiner needs to be given clear direction to any additional material appearing in the answer booklet after a response appears to have ended. A page reference is often very helpful, e.g. 'Question 2 continues on page 7'.

Comments on Individual Questions:

Question No. 1

Answers to this question were generally of a sensible length, although a few candidates do drift into lengthy personal comment more appropriate to Question 2. The best responses showed some precision in selection of key points and understood the difference between what the Homeless World Cup is, in itself and what it has achieved, in terms of successful outcomes. Weaker candidates drifted into general comment about the history of the event and its organisation. More successful candidates focused purposefully on its achievements in terms of raising the profile of the issue of homelessness and transforming individual lives. Candidates did need to distinguish between the various outcomes. It was not enough to simply state that the Homeless World Cup 'got them off the streets'. There were a variety of separate points to be made about, for example, improving fitness, establishing a sense of responsibility, developing pride and self-esteem.

One slight misunderstanding crept in as candidates believed that the initiative provided homes for the participants, rather than the more subtle idea that they encouraged a better sense of direction towards that final goal and enabled access to other, more conventional, services. This was a minor error but it does indicate the importance of close reading. Nevertheless, most candidates did demonstrate clear understanding of the text and examiners reported a good range of points, although delivery of these points was sometimes flawed. There was a pronounced tendency to lift phrases from the text this session, with some candidates offering lengthy quotation. Use of 'own words' remains an area that would benefit from improvement.

Question No. 2

This is traditionally the most extensively prepared question on the paper and often the most misunderstood. Examiners reported that candidates are approaching this task with a checklist of devices to identify. We see the mnemonics written in the margin and sometimes find the candidates reporting that some of the devices they were looking for were *not* in the text. Clearly students will be taught that statistics add validity and creative use of language adds emphasis but in the examination response candidates should be using this knowledge to show understanding of the given extract and certainly here there should have been focus on persuasive language (e.g. 'remarkable', 'unique', 'more effective than', 'there is no doubting'). There were plenty of examples that could have been used but too many answers stayed with the pictures and the headings, in some cases making such comment the bulk of the answer. Comments on subheadings and paragraph divisions remain an area for improvement as many candidates inform the examiners that these headings will help the reader 'choose the bits they want to skip'. Some comment on the images was sound, looking at the way the three pictures illustrate progression from the bleak isolation of the streets, through training and on to a team celebration. The higher scoring responses offered insightful comment on the emotive nature of the 'before and after' stories of the named individuals, the clinching neatness of the last paragraph and, the most striking language feature, the extended football metaphor that demonstrated the progress from the 'bench' to the 'goal'.

Question No.3

Text B is usually the more challenging piece but examiners are regularly reporting that many candidates perform more successfully on this task than they do on question 2, once they are freed from the straightjacket of the formulaic 'presentation' approach and begin to think more thoughtfully about use of language. This was a complex text offering many opportunities for insightful comment. The majority of candidates wrote well on the imagery that emphasised physical discomfort and the filth of the location with many moving on into the areas of difficulty, exploring the dehumanising nature of the experience and the psychological impact of boredom and loneliness. The best answers explored the repetition of 'nothing' and the monochrome imagery ('blackness', 'black hole', 'darkness', 'night'). There were also some sharp observations about Healey's animal companions, or 'anti-pets' as described by one candidate.

Comment on tone was sometimes less precise and success here often does depend on the range of vocabulary the candidates have at their disposal. There was the ubiquitous 'negative' tone but some spoke of 'depressing' language and better answers identified tones of self-disgust, despair, even desperation in the final rhetorical question coupled with a very direct, even matter-of-fact approach to the subject matter. The extract did contain a measure of humour in the 'good' bottle of wine and the 'pantomime' with Tommy's possessions and this proved difficult for candidates primed to say that humour creates a 'light-hearted' mood. Here the grim humour was much darker, again illustrating the need for a flexible approach and the danger of generic comment.

Formulaic device spotting was evident in responses to question 3.

Question No. 4

This was the more popular of the two options, with candidates proving very confident in handling the 'speech to the class' format. A strong sense of audience and the ability to create an effective 'voice' often lifted responses into the higher bands. It is worth reminding candidates that the 'speech' format, although it may be less formal, does benefit from some planning, to just the same extent as tasks requiring letters or articles and there is a danger that speeches offering loose association of thoughts will lose direction, become repetitive or self-contradict.

The majority of answers took the view that indeed there was injustice in the world and they were rather harsh on children of wealthy parents, embracing the need for a level playing field at the

start of life and equality of opportunity for all. A smaller but significant number argued, often quite narrowly, that the poor ought to work harder but this was balanced in many cases by candidates who wrote very movingly about their own struggles to get by on 'so little'.

Successful speeches did employ persuasive language and rhetorical devices to gain support from the imaginary audience. It should be noted that not all 'persuasive' writing tasks intend to get the audience to 'take action' or 'make a donation'. Understanding of writing to generate thought and influence opinion should be encouraged. The very best answers gave thoughtful consideration to all the implications of the prompt, often adopting a global view and acknowledging the dangers of oversimplifying the issues. The more balanced and complex a candidate's thinking might be, then the more considered and complex the writing becomes.

Question No. 5

This was a less frequent choice but was often very successful with some highly engaging, often very amusing accounts of peer support during various sporting events, outdoor expeditions and theatrical performances. To sound one cautionary note, it is often a feature of the free-format option that candidates will get thoroughly caught up in their narratives and they can lose sight of the prompt. There was an expectation that 'support' would be a central aspect of the response yet sadly it sometimes appeared only implicitly or towards the end of a tale as an afterthought. It is a feature of the band descriptors for Section B Writing that there should be a measure of understanding of the task, just as there is in Section A.

Structure and organisational skills are significant discriminators in both writing tasks and it is clear that retelling a personal experience does provide a chronological sequence which gives the writing shape and sometimes some dialogue to add variety and interest. Examiners genuinely do appreciate the writing from personal experience that candidates give in Section B. This session we read compelling and moving accounts of candidates dealing with loss and loneliness, illness and disability. Writing grounded in deeply felt personal concerns is often crafted strongly and an authentic voice emerges as the words are made to matter.

Not surprisingly, appreciation of the support given to candidates through GCSE results was a popular choice of topic and examiners always wish that it was possible to direct some of these fulsome tributes back to the people mentioned. Please accept this report as evidence that your efforts did not go unacknowledged.

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