In May 2009 session there was a total of 5674 candidates for the SEC English Language examination. This was 259 candidates less than last year. In fact the number of candidates has been decreasing every year as can be seen from the table below.

### Table 1: Distribution of grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>Abs</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IIA</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIB</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>2733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>1072</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>1185</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>5674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>1.85%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Statistical Information**

The number of candidates has been decreasing every year as can be seen from the table below.

### Table 2: Number of candidates taking SEC English Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>Candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>5674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>6006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>6004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>6229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This year, there were 2941 (52%) candidates who opted for Paper IIA and 2733 (48%) who opted for Paper IIB. This marks a slight increase from last year’s balance when 51% of the applicants opted for Paper IIA and 49% chose Paper IIB. Table 3 below shows that there has been an increasing shift towards Paper IIA, a trend that has been going on for the past six years and can be explained by the inclusion of another pass grade, Grade 5, for the A paper in 2003.

### Table 3: Percentage of candidates choosing A and B papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>PAPER A</th>
<th>PAPER B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This swing towards Paper A continues to be worrying as this year 349, that is a good 11.9% of candidates taking the A paper, got an Unclassified mark. Of these, 282 could have been awarded Grade 6 or Grade 7 had they opted for the B paper. Again, among the B candidates there is more to worry about. Out of 2733 who took the examination, 836 (30.6%) did not make it to Grade 7 and remained unclassified. Of these 383 (14%) scored less than 25 marks overall.
This points to the fact that there is a sizeable group of students who should not have opted for the A paper, and a large group who should not have taken the examination at all as they were not ready for it.

**Absences**

There was a marked decrease in absences this year in both paper IIA and paper IIB. Out of the 2941 Paper IIA candidates 21 (0.7%) absented themselves from all examination papers, compared to last year’s 1.5%. Only 84 (3.1%) Paper IIB candidates did not show up for any part of the examination. This is 0.4% less than last year’s examination in the B paper.

This year marked a decrease in absences in the oral and listening parts of the examination. In fact only 27 (a marked contrast to last year’s 52) Paper IIA candidates missed both oral and listening parts of the examination. There were 121 Paper IIB candidates who missed both oral and listening parts compared to last year’s 200. One hopes that the message has successfully been driven home, namely that candidates who absent themselves from the oral and listening parts of the examination effectively forfeit 25% of the total marks and that it is highly improbable that these lost marks can be compensated for on the other parts of the examination. Hopefully, the stress on the importance of Speaking and Listening skills which should be given their due in the preparation of students for this examination has been understood.

**Comments on the candidates’ performance**

The recommendations and comments made in this report are aimed at all teachers of English in Secondary Schools and not just at teachers of Form Five, as the latter cannot possibly achieve results without the proper groundwork of the previous years.

**Paper 1 Part 1 (a) Listening Comprehension**

In this part of the examination candidates listen to two texts and answer questions based on the texts. A total of 15% of the total marks were allotted to the testing of listening skills and the two texts were weighted equally. The texts dealt with two different semantic areas but in the two sets of texts used there was thematic continuity. The first set of texts consisted of the transcript of a talk on a well-known author whilst the second set of texts consisted of the transcript of a radio programme welcoming tourists to Dublin.

There was a very evident difference between the performance of candidates sitting for the A and B papers. A good 82% of Paper A candidates scored more than a total of 15 (out of 30) marks and it was not uncommon to come across very high marks (27-30). Only 27.5% of Paper B candidates managed to score 15 marks and over and one often came across very low marks (0-3).

The questions asked assessed a number of enabling skills including listening for detail, listening for gist, working out the meaning from context, and inferencing. Thus the testing of the ability to comprehend at word level, at sentence level and at a general level was ensured. The format of the questions was varied.

The questions on Text A included:

- reference questions
- a series of statements to be marked as true or false together with a reason
- selecting words

The questions on Text B included:

- grid filling
- matching
- multiple choice

The exercise where candidates had to indicate whether a statement was True or False and give a reason proved the most challenging because of the two-step thinking process. Some candidates found it difficult to substantiate their answer from what they had heard.
Overall Comments

- Candidates performed better in the questions on text B. In fact, a good number of candidates performed significantly better, at times even earning double the marks on text B than they did on text A. Candidates’ overall better performance in the questions on Text B may be explained by the fact that the more challenging questions, namely the reference and true/false questions were set on text A.

- More training in listening comprehension exercises may be called for where students need to be trained to listen carefully and to analyse what they are hearing.

- It is crucial that students pay more attention to the rubric and to what is required of them in a particular question.

- It is recommended that more training in the actual handling of the examination may be given. For instance, training in note-taking is of utmost importance for the students, so as to be able to approach the exam much better.

The Oral

Oral skills were weighted at 10% and the test consists of a role play and a conversation prompted by one picture. 89% of Paper A candidates obtained a pass-mark in the oral compared to 61% of the Paper B candidates.

This part of the examination is conducted by a separate set of examiners. During the briefing session the examiners were familiarised with the content and rationale of the speaking test.

Paper 1 Part 1 (b) Speaking using a picture prompt

Candidates were shown a picture intended to visually prompt them and activate their schematic knowledge. By looking at the pictures candidates are led to the semantic area they will be asked to talk about. A few of the examination questions relate to the picture itself, other questions are general and arise from the picture. This year the pictures depicted scenes about children at play, animals and animal conservation, travel, jobs, famous personalities. Candidates had to predict what the content of a book would be about, if the picture was used on the book’s cover.

Candidates are more at ease with the picture prompt when compared to the role play. This results perhaps because the picture involves no reading and is easy to comprehend.

Paper 1 Part (b) Speaking using a role play

This year’s role play took the form of a conversation between a young person and a salesperson in a shop. The roles candidates had to take were of young people asking for an exchange of or a refund for a damaged article bought from the shop.

It is imperative that candidates practise speaking skills in class regularly and throughout the whole scholastic year. They should practise meaningful, authentic speaking activities which will help them feel at ease during oral examinations. Speaking is a skill which is as important as writing and reading and it should be given its due importance.

Paper 1 Part 2 Language Use

This is the last component of Paper 1 which is common to all candidates (the other components common to Paper A and Paper B candidates are the Listening Comprehension and the Oral). Candidates are allowed one hour and a quarter to complete this paper. The tasks test the candidates’ accurate use of the language and cover knowledge of: spelling, morphology, vocabulary, collocations, syntax, structures and sociolinguistic competence. It is worth stressing that this paper and the writing task in Paper 2 reward accuracy and marks are lost for spelling mistakes.
This component of the examination served to differentiate well among candidates. Those with a higher competence were able to show what they could do. Only 9.4% of Paper B candidates went past the 25 marks (out of 50) compared to 69.5% of Paper A candidates. Indeed, 151 Paper A candidates managed to score over 40 marks, whereas only 1 Paper B candidate managed to score 40 marks. It is important to reiterate that this part of the examination is completely based on accuracy.

All exercises presented language in a mini-context, thus creating an acceptable level of meaningful language. This emphasises and ensures that what is being tested is the ability to use language in a context, and not the ability to manipulate the mechanical aspects of grammar.

Exercise 1 required candidates to match spoken items with their corresponding response. The expressions which seem to have caused most problems were “Care for a spin?”; “Flattery will get you nowhere”; “Let's toss for it”; “Well, you can’t win them all”. Although these were expressions taken from current language use, many candidates were confused which response to choose.

Exercise 2 focused on reporting speech set in an authentic context. A few candidates had no idea what indirect speech is and got the exercise completely wrong. The rest of the candidates encountered difficulties in the use of time markers such as ‘last week’ which was left unchanged and in their ability to backshift tenses such as ‘got’ (past simple) to ‘had got’ (past perfect). Many candidates did not change ‘will’ to ‘would’ in ‘I promise I will’. A common error involved using ‘her’ instead of ‘she’ following ‘Graham suggested’. Other errors included the omission of a part of the original dialogue. Many students got the Past Participle of ‘forgot’ (forgotten) wrong, writing ‘had forgot’.

Exercise 3 was a punctuation task. There were a few candidates who completely changed the word order, distorting the meaning and the aim of the exercise. A few other candidates added words of their own. For example ‘said’ was added after ‘announced’ which showed they did not know the meaning of the latter. Many did not realise that there were two sentences and put a comma after Sunday instead of a full stop.

Exercise 4 was a word formation exercise. The main challenge here was the formation of the adjective ‘unforeseen’ from the verb ‘foresee’. Very few candidates got this right. A considerable number of candidates had problems with this exercise, not having a clue as to what part of speech they had to form. Many wrote ‘advertised’ instead of ‘advertising’; ‘knew’ instead of ‘known’; ‘entertained’ instead of ‘entertaining’. Common spelling errors included ‘editor’, ‘adaption’, ‘mysteries’ (instead of mysterious).

Exercise 5 required candidates to fill in each space with a suitable question tag. A few resorted to long phrases showing that they had no idea what question tags are. A few others left out the question mark at the end or started the tag question with a capital letter. Even though many students knew what a tag question was, yet they still used the wrong tag for the situation given; even using the wrong pronoun apart from the wrong verb such as in: ‘But we promised not to tell, will you?’ Spelling errors often involved ‘mustn’t we?’ where the ‘t’ was left out.

Exercise 6 was a cloze passage. Candidates had to fill in the missing words according to the context. The gaps which were filled correctly by most candidates were (3) an/other (4) most and (10) kind, type and to a lesser extent (6) beneficial, essential, vital. Otherwise candidates fared poorly in the remaining gaps, filling in with words which did not fit in the context. For example, in number 1, the words rivers and forests were used instead of ‘over’. Instead of (4) ‘owe their name’, some candidates wrote ‘own’. The expression ‘trace their origin’ seemed to be unheard of while a number of candidates followed ‘water up into the’ with ground for no.8, disregarding the preposition ‘up’.

Exercise 7 dealt with phrasal verbs. Candidates had to choose the correct phrasal verb from a given list and put it in the correct form to complete an email. Most candidates found difficulty in choosing the right phrasal verb. No.3 ‘hold back’ was the verb which was most frequently filled in correctly. Otherwise the performance in this exercise was quite poor.

Exercise 8 required candidates to put the verbs in brackets in the correct form. There was a worrying number of candidates who wrote ‘runned’ or ‘runed’ as the past tense of ‘run’. A considerable number of candidates did not realise there was a switch to the future tense in no. 7 ‘will be refurbished’ and continued using the past tenses. The conditional tenses in no.5 ‘wouldn’t have been’ and no. 10 ‘would have been’ proved to be major obstacles for most candidates.

Exercise 9 dealt with prepositions. Once more candidates fared poorly. There were signs of L1 interference such as in no.8 ‘could break with’ (instead of ‘under/underneath/beneath) them’; and in no.6 ‘to scramble out
(instead of through) a window’. Many candidates were unfamiliar with expressions like no.9 ‘watched in despair’; some of them writing ‘watched for despair’ or ‘watched with despair.’

**Exercise 10** asked candidates to fill in one word which continued an idiomatic expression in context. Most candidates fared poorly. A popular response to no.5 ‘beating about the bush’ was ‘beating about the teachers’; ‘the eleventh hour’ was often filled in as ‘the last hour’; ‘barking up the wrong tree’ was changed to ‘climbing the wrong tree’. For the rest most candidates used their imagination.

One concludes that candidates lack a confident familiarity with the language. In fact, overall, very poor spelling featured in the majority of scripts. As already stated elsewhere in this report, accuracy is very important in this part of the examination and incorrect spelling is penalised. This is a comment that has been reiterated in previous reports, but it seems that these recommendations are not being taken on board by candidates sitting for this exam.

**Paper IIA and IIB Question 1 Writing task**

Candidates were required to write either a book review, or a film review, or a short story, or an article for a school magazine. Candidates were expected to show the ability to describe, narrate, argue, persuade and compare, as set out in the current syllabus, in tasks which are realistic and which they might need to produce in real life.

**General remarks IIA and IIB**

It is to be pointed out that as from this year in order for Paper A candidates to obtain a Grade 3 or higher they must satisfy the examiners in the Writing component in Paper 2.

**Choice of writing task.** All choices were tackled, but not in equal numbers. In Paper A the narrative (question 2) attracted most candidates. In fact 50.5% chose to write the short story, 48% opted for the article (question 3) whilst only 1.5% chose to write the book review (question 1).

On the other hand, in Paper B 40% chose the film review (question 1); 31% chose the short story (question 2) and 28% opted for the article (question 3).

**Length of writing.** Previous examiners’ reports have pointed out that overlong pieces which ignore the word limit lose marks. Yet year in year out many candidates ignore this warning and produce longer pieces of writing to the detriment of the logical organisation of the writing. Candidates are to be warned that marks are deducted when the word limit is not adhered to. Candidates’ writing that is less than the stipulated length is also marked down. Moreover, those candidates who put down 350 words at the end of their composition when in fact they have written over 400 words have had marks deducted. Examiners are generally unimpressed by inflated word counts.

**Planning.** Although there were several attempts by candidates to use the blank space on the examination paper for planning, this is still very much underused. Candidates are encouraged to plan their writing before they actually start. Practice in class in this aspect is encouraged and recommended.

**Accuracy.** One marvels at the high degree of inaccuracy in this part of the examination where the candidates are instructed on the examination paper itself *to pay attention to vocabulary, grammar, paragraphing, layout, spelling, and punctuation*. In many instances these are disregarded with the consequence of loss of marks.

**Task achievement.** Candidates are to be coached in understanding the rubric well and in following the instructions it presents. If the writing task is a narrative, then the appropriate narrative style is required. This year several candidates wrote a discursive composition instead of a narrative, for example; something which cost them marks. Another warning is that when candidates are in doubt about some aspect of the title, discretion becomes the better part of valour – a recommendation candidates ignore at their own risk

**Instances of good practice.** A small number of candidates showed that they are able to produce pieces of writing that were a joy to read. These pieces were relatively free of inaccuracies, achieved the task, were to the point, respected the required word limit and the conventions of punctuation and format.

The comments below generally point to failings in candidates’ writing, however, this is done with a purpose: that of serving as guidelines of what examiners expect and for candidates to avoid such inaccuracies.
Paper IIA Writing tasks

Paper A

Book Review:
Very few candidates chose this title, perhaps because they were asked to write about two books and compare them. In fact, the first writing task was a review in which the candidates had to compare and contrast two thrillers which they had read. One of the problems was that several candidates discussed two films rather than two books, thus losing marks because they did not follow the rubric. Others discussed two books but which cannot be considered to be thrillers, for example, “The Merchant of Venice” and “Pride and Prejudice”. A good number of candidates tended to write two separate reviews and attempted to bring out a common aspect between the two books. Candidates need to be taught that a book review is not an excuse to narrate the story, or in this case, stories, and stop there. Giving away the ending of the book(s) was another common mistake. The candidates that scored well utilized the correct format of a review, that is, used the correct style, commented on setting, characters, etc and wrote a recommendation at the end.

The Short Story:
The second writing task, which was a very popular choice, was the Short Story entitled “The Challenge”. Some of the candidates who attempted this question scored the highest marks as they used their imagination to come up with original ideas and also had the linguistic competence to do the task well. Unfortunately, many of the short stories exceeded the word limit (a substantial number of essays were well over 400 words long) and were subsequently penalised. A number of candidates used the wrong genre and instead of writing a short story, wrote discursive essays. In some cases candidates spent more time setting the scene or introducing the characters, rather than focusing on the actual “challenge” itself. There seemed to be a tendency of writing very long sentences, sometimes even the length of a whole paragraph. This highlighted the already existing difficulty of using the correct tenses. Moreover, although the title was in the singular, some candidates wrote about facing various challenges. Candidates need to be aware that they will lose marks if they show that they have not understood the title well.

The Article:
The third writing task, another popular choice, was the article in which candidates had to argue about how far parents should influence a teenager’s choices in life. A number of essays showed that candidates are being trained to use an appropriate style when writing an article. Nevertheless, a number of candidates forgot to write a title to their article; others began their article as they would a letter, with “Dear Reader”, “Dear friends”, “Dear Editor,” being popular choices; a number of these essays even ended with “Love,” or “Regards,”. Such misconceptions need to be rectified.

Paper IIB Writing tasks

Paper B

Film Review:
Most candidates restricted themselves to an opening sentence in which the title of the film was mentioned and then just narrated the plot (including how the film ends). The names of the actors and the director (even if fictitious) and the quality of the acting and direction were hardly ever mentioned. A number remembered to end their essays with a recommendation, but other elements such as comments about the soundtrack, pace, setting, etc. which one would expect to read in a film review, were hardly ever mentioned. While many of the essays were indeed about an action film, a handful chose to ignore this and wrote ‘reviews’ about films which do not fall into this category (e.g. Oliver Twist). Quite a number began their ‘film review’ as one would a narrative, with information about plans to go to the cinema or rent a DVD. It is obvious that a lot more work needs to be done for students to be able to produce a credible film review.

Narrative:
Here again, essays tended to be too long. Most of the candidates did not achieve the task well because they tended to concentrate on the contents of the diary itself without making any relevant connection to how their life changed after the discovery of this diary. These candidates obviously lost marks. Candidates that did very poorly lacked sequence and coherence and presented a number of language problems relating mainly to tenses, spelling, punctuation and also many instances of unidiomatic expressions.
Article:
As seen in the Paper A articles, many students forgot to write a title. Format was also incorrect at times. As usual, candidates lost marks because of grammatical errors, particularly incorrect tenses (especially the use of the past perfect and the inexplicable switching from past to present in the narratives and reviews), incorrect syntax, punctuation (using commas instead of full stops and using full stops incorrectly), and poor spelling (“responsable”, “independance”, “teenangers”, “challange” were commonly found. Though the majority of candidates who attempted this task showed an adequate level of competence in dealing with argumentative essays, a number of candidates wrote one-sided essays, usually focusing on the negative influence of friends on teenagers. A minority of candidates wrote irrelevant articles as they tended to focus on problems regarding teens rather than on the influence of friends on a teenager’s life.

Writing – Concluding Comments
Limited vocabulary, especially in the articles and film reviews, was evident: e.g. “Parent’s tend to be too much influensive”; the word “choices” seems to be considered as interchangeable with “decisions”. In the articles, especially, there was a consistent misuse of the apostrophe (“parents decision”; “parent’s tend”, “teenagers life”). A number of candidates who tackled the film review did not seem to know the words “protagonist” and “star” and consistently used the word “artist”. The influence of Maltese was at times very evident: “It was a nice film which cuts your breath”. Other common incorrect expressions were “do a mistake”, “taking choices”, “unexperienced”.

Finally, a word about word count: A number of candidates are writing the number of words at the bottom of their essay. This is helpful to them. However, most seem not to know that every word counts and are consistently counting fewer words. Consequently they might think they are within the limits but would actually be well beyond. It might also be, of course, that some think they can hoodwink the markers.

Paper 2 Reading Comprehension
The reading skills tested in the IIA and IIB papers are largely similar as are the question formats. The difference lies in the difficulty level of the texts, the amount of reading required, and the level of reading skills required.

The question formats included short answer questions, matching, reference questions, true and false together with a reason and explaining the meaning of a word or phrase.

The reading skills assessed covered reading for gist, reading for detail, inferencing, working out the meaning from context, summarising part of the information and working out the author’s intention.

The texts varied in topic and in type thus allowing the examiners to achieve a more accurate picture of the candidates’ reading abilities.

Reading Comprehension - Paper II A
Passage A

Q1 This question was mostly answered correctly, however the distracter ‘Ancient Egyptian Burials’ proved problematic for some students.

It is worth noting that some students circled the answer instead of underlined it. Candidates need to following instructions to the letter.

Q2 Most students fulfilled this task. However the answer to b) ‘troubling’ was less forthcoming.

Q3 Most students fulfilled this task accurately.

Q4 This question posed the greatest difficulty. Most candidates merely reiterated the text word for word, without bothering to answer the questions. Most even failed to realise that they were expected to give, ‘three ways’ and just quoted the text in paragraph form although they were expected to write in list form as indicated in the answer.
Q5 Most candidates managed to answer appropriately, but lost marks by leaving out part of the information.

Q6 In quite a few instances candidates quoted ‘did little to shed any light’ from question four, however, quite a few students managed to explain ‘enigma’.

Q7 Most candidates answered correctly but left out part of the information, mostly ‘spared his life’ thereby losing part of the marks.

Q8 Most candidates answered this correctly.

Q9 Most candidates managed to quote the correct words but very few managed to get full marks because sometimes they even quoted full sentences. Once again, the fact that candidates need to follow instructions to the letter needs to be reinforced.

Q10 Surprisingly many students failed to get this right. Some simply said ‘E man’, ‘belongs to the Cairo museum’, ‘Rameses’, ‘Egyptians’ despite the fact the Pentwere is mentioned in question 8.

Q11 Summary
Most students exceeded the word limit thus losing precious marks. Quite a number of weaker students went completely out of point discussing Pentwere instead of ancient Egyptian beliefs and practices, thereby losing all marks. Many wasted words on reiterating the question, clearly indicating that their summary skills are not up to scratch. It is very clear that the majority of candidates lack summary skills. This is a very important skill which needs to be given the necessary attention. One also notes the lack of grammatical accuracy as well as spelling mistakes which are obviously penalised in this question.

Passage B  Unhappy People Watch More TV

Q1 Most candidates answered this correctly.

Q2 ‘malaise’, ‘involvement’, ‘pioneer’ proved to be the more demanding of the vocabulary questions.

Q3 b), f) and h) were the more problematic.

Q4 Many candidates said that watching TV caused depression without using their own words.

Q5 a) While most candidates answered correctly they were unable to quote the evidence from the text and were heavily influenced by their answer to Q4.
   b) Most candidates answered this correctly
   c) Many candidates got this right. However, quite a number reversed the theory that it is because people watch TV that the economy worsens thereby losing their mark.
   d) While many candidates answered this correctly the ones who didn’t, reiterated the text given.

Q6 Most candidates answered correctly but many either put ‘Sleeping’ only or ‘Watching TV’ only, thus losing half a mark.

Q7 Many failed to mention ‘immediate gratification’. The weaker ones said that ‘Americans are lazy’.

Q8 a) Not many candidates managed to answer this correctly and most wrote part sentences instead of a phrase.
   b) Very few candidates quoted a phrasal verb and those who did quoted part sentences, forfeiting their mark.

Q9 ‘It’s habitual’ and ‘it’s addictive’ were very often used as two separate answers. Few managed to acquire full marks for this. Only very weak candidates failed to get some marks.

Writing Task
Very few candidates managed to keep to the correct word limit; some only exceeded it by a few words while others wrote as many as 200 words. Most candidates were capable of using the correct letter format but signed off by using their surname, while some others totally disregarded the fictitious address and name completely and used their own. ‘I suggest you to’ was a common grammatical error. Weaker candidates did not complete this task.
Reading Comprehension – Paper IIB

PASSAGE A  Swimming with Sharks

Q1 Most candidates got at least two physical qualities correct (length and weight), though some stated how tall (rather than long) the shark was. Many put down what it eats instead of the fact that it has razor-sharp teeth.

Q2 This question caused problems for quite a number of candidates who thought that it meant the shark could easily attack a boat.

Q3 Most candidates managed well with ‘tossed helpless’ but very few managed ‘frothing sea water’. Many wrote ‘lightning attack’. Quite a few wrote more than 3 words, thus losing the mark.

Q4 The majority of the answers here were correct, though a few said ‘fierce’ – probably copying the word in question 3.

Q5 Quite a few candidates got both answers right, many got at least one correct. Many marks were lost, however, for using more than two words.

Q6 Quite a few candidates got at least 2 points out of the 3, though many referred to when the sharks appeared (as in question 7) rather than when he jumped into the water, therefore answering incorrectly.

Q7 Many candidates found the correct answer to this question, but failed to put it into their own words.

Q8 Many candidates did well in both (a) and (b) in this question.

Q9 Explaining this phrase was far above most of the candidates. The part which most did manage to explain was ‘aiding’, whereas many repeated ‘understanding’, and quite a few understood ‘much-maligned’ to mean that the sharks are actually tame and friendly animals.

Q10 Many candidates got at least two of these correct. However, quite a few candidates wrote phrases in each space.

Q11 The majority of the candidates managed to get at least half of the marks available in this question, with the last five answers being mostly correct. However, quite a few managed to score high marks in this exercise.

PASSAGE B Youngsters ‘addicted to mobile phones’

Q1 A large number of candidates got this question either completely or partially correct. The main mistakes were answers which were related to question 2, or else candidates misunderstood the question and gave answers which were stereotypical of a person with some sort of addiction, usually drugs and alcohol, such as stealing.

Q2 Most candidates managed to do well in this exercise, many getting full marks.

Q3 Although there were candidates who managed to answer this question correctly, some resorted to inventing their own answers, such as saving money due to less calls.

Q4 A large number of candidates put the answers for question 3 here, though quite a few managed to get at least 2 out of the 3 correct answers.

Q5 Again, many candidates offered an answer not taken from the passage, saying that he was not sure because the students taking part in the study may have lied. Those who did give the right answer often quoted word for word, thus losing marks.

Q6 Again, many candidates quoted from the passage here, however, they did at least find the correct answer.
Q7 Candidates fared well in 7b but not in 7a.

Q8 A large number of candidates managed 8b and 8c well but did not do well in 8a and 8d. However, quite a few managed to get full marks or almost full marks in this exercise.

Writing Task

Many candidates are still unaware of the proper layout of an informal letter, often using elements of both the formal and the informal letter. Most candidates did use the given address, but still lost marks for writing it all on one line, or in other incorrect layouts. A large amount of candidates did not bother to put in the date and quite a few signed off without using the given name, while many also signed off using both the given name and surname, thus losing marks. A common mistake found in the opening line of the letter was ‘I hope you are good,’ a clear example of L1 interference. Candidates very often went over the word limit, sometimes excessively, therefore losing marks.

Conclusion

After correcting over 5600 scripts, the examiners feel that there is still room for improvement in order to reach the desired level in the use of accurate and fluent English. A concerted effort is necessary to improve the level of written and spoken English. Teaching methods that should be used are those that expose students to the language rather than just making them learn about the language. Indeed, students should constantly be exposed to the language through listening, speaking, reading and writing from as early as possible in their learning career. It is only in this way that they will aspire to achieve a good command of the language.

Board of Examiners

August 2009