

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE

SEC

ITALIAN

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EXAMINERS' REPORT

**MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE
EXAMINATIONS BOARD**

**SEC ITALIAN
MAY 2012 SESSION
EXAMINERS' REPORT**

General information and statistics

This report assumes that the readers are familiar with the SEC Italian 2012 Syllabus and format of the paper. The components and weighting are as follows:

Table 1: Total marks allotted to each task

Paper I (Part 1) Oral	15%
Paper I (Part 1) Listening	15%
Paper I (Part 2) Language Use	25%
Paper II Comprehension	20%
Paper II Writing	25%
Total	100%

Statistical information

Unfortunately, in the 2012 SEC May session of examinations, the number of candidates for the SEC Italian examination has fallen once again. In May 2007, there were 2660 candidates who sat for Italian, in May 2008 there were 2576, in 2009 there were 2361 and in 2010, 2221 applied to take this examination, 140 candidates fewer than the previous year. Last year, the number of candidates who applied for Italian was 2035, 186 fewer than in 2010. Of these, 1038 (51%) opted for Paper IIA and 997 (49%) for Paper IIB. This marks an inversion from the previous year's balance when 49% of the applicants opted for Paper IIA and 51% chose Paper IIB. This year, in May, there were 2025 candidates who sat for SEC Italian, 10 fewer than last year. Of these 1102 (54%) opted for Paper A and 923 (46%) opted for Paper B.

Table 2: Italian at SEC level

	Total Registrations SEC	Registrations (Italian)	%
2003	7764	3027	38.98
2004	7861	2981	37.92
2005	8038	2925	36.38
2006	7983	2794	34.99
2007	7942	2660	33.49
2008	7879	2576	32.69
2009	7378	2361	32.00
2010	7492	2221	29.64
2011	7177	2035	28.35
2012	7295	2025	27.76

Candidates' Performance

In Table 3 below, the candidates' performance is presented according to the grade achieved:

Table 3: 2012 grade distribution

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	U	Abs	Total
IIA	121	246	346	228	96	-	-	52	13	1102
%	11	22.3	31.4	20.7	8.7	-	-	4.7	1.2	100
II B	-	-	-	170	275	181	66	178	53	923
%	-	-	-	18.4	29.8	19.6	7.2	19.3	5.7	100
Total	121	246	346	398	370	180	68	230	66	2025
%	6	12.1	17.1	19.7	18.3	8.9	3.4	11.4	3.3	100

Compared to 2011, in 2012, there was a decrease in the percentage of Paper A candidates who obtained Grades 1 and 3 but an increase in those who obtained Grade 2. Whereas in 2011, 11.6% of Paper A candidates obtained Grade 1, 21.7% obtained Grade 2 and 31.6% obtained Grade 3, in 2012 the percentage of students who obtained Grade 1 decreased to 11.0, Grade 2 increased to 22.3 and Grade 3 decreased to 31.4. In Paper IIB there was an increase (0.8%) of candidates who were awarded Grade 4 and a decrease (0.6%) of candidates awarded Grade 5.

There were less candidates who were unclassified (i.e. candidates who were awarded a 'U') when compared to 2011 (-1.4%). On the other hand there was a 0.7% increase on 2011 in the number of students who were absent for all the exam.

This year, as in previous years, there was also a good number of students who were absent in the oral and/or listening parts of the examination. In fact out of 1102 Paper A candidates, 8 (0.73%) missed the oral part, another 8 (0.73%) missed the listening part and 16 (1.45%) candidates missed both the oral and listening parts of the examination. In Paper B, out of 923 candidates, 46 (4.98%) missed the oral part, 16 (1.73%) missed the listening part whilst the number of candidates who missed both the oral and listening parts was 74 (8.02%). This means that besides the 53 Paper B candidates (5.74%) who absented themselves from all examination papers, another 83 candidates (8.99%) missed some part of the examination. This implies that candidates who absent themselves from the oral and listening parts of the examination might be unaware of the fact that they are effectively forfeiting 30% of the total marks and that it is highly improbable that these lost marks can be compensated for in the other parts of the examination. It also implies that more preparation is needed to develop sound Speaking and Listening skills.

Overall, as is evident in the 2010 paper as well as in last year's, when compared to the recent past there were considerably less students who took the wrong option when choosing to sit for Paper IIA. In fact, from their performance in the 2011 and 2012 SEC examination, it is evident that the vast majority of students who opted for Paper IIA are capable of reaching the Threshold Level in Italian, as described in The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) published by the Council of Europe (http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp).

In Table 4 the grades awarded in 2011 are compared to those awarded in 2012:

Table 4: 2011-2012: a comparison

	2011		2012	
	No. of candidates	Percentage of those who sat for the examination (n = 1983)	No. of candidates	Percentage of those who sat for the examination (n =1959)
Grades 1-3	673	33.9	713	36.4
Grades 4-5	790	39.8	768	39.2
Total grades 1-5	1463	73.8	1481	75.6
Grades 6-7	259	13.1	248	12.7
Total grades 1-7	1722	86.8	1729	88.3

The figures in Table 4 show that the percentage of students who obtained the highest grades increased when compared to last year and that there was a slight decrease of students who obtained Grade 4 or 5. This shows that there was a slight improvement in the candidates' general performance in 2012, with a slight decrease in the percentage of students who were awarded Grade 6 or 7.

Through the figures presented in Tables 5a and 5b, one may compare the average mark obtained by students for each part of the paper in 2011 and in 2012. For each part, the maximum mark that could be allotted is included within brackets (e.g. the Oral part of the exam carries a maximum of 15 marks, the Listening 15 marks, etc.):

Table 5a: Average mark (raw score) obtained in the different parts of the paper (2011)

	<i>Oral</i> (15)	<i>Listening</i> (15)	<i>Language Use</i> (25)	<i>Comprehension</i> (20)	<i>Writing Task</i> (25)	Total (100)
Paper 2A	10.7	11.6	18.0	13.3	15.9	69.5
Paper 2B	8.1	9.1	12.1	9.9	8.6	47.8
Difference (2A - 2B)	2.6	2.5	5.9	3.4	7.3	21.7

Table 5b: Average mark (raw score) obtained in the different parts of the paper (2012)

	<i>Oral</i> (15)	<i>Listening</i> (15)	<i>Language Use</i> (25)	<i>Comprehension</i> (20)	<i>Writing Task</i> (25)	Total (100)
Paper 2A	10.5	12.5	17.5	11.7	14.3	66.5
Paper 2B	7.8	10.1	12.1	13.2	9.1	52.3
Difference (2A - 2B)	2.7	2.4	5.4	-1.5	5.2	14.2

These figures are presented in Tables 6a and 6b as percentage points, and the changes are then summarized by means of the figures included in Table 6c.

Table 6a: Average mark (as a percentage) obtained in the different parts of the paper (2011)

	<i>Oral</i>	<i>Listening</i>	<i>Language Use</i>	<i>Comprehension</i>	<i>Writing Task</i>	Total (100)
Paper 2A	71.3	77.3	72.0	66.5	63.6	70.1
Paper 2B	54.0	60.7	48.4	49.5	34.4	49.4
Difference (2A - 2B)	17.3	16.6	23.6	17.0	29.2	20.7

Table 6b: Average mark (as a percentage) obtained in the different parts of the paper (2012)

	<i>Oral</i>	<i>Listening</i>	<i>Language Use</i>	<i>Comprehension</i>	<i>Writing Task</i>	Total (100)
Paper 2A	70.0	83.3	70.0	58.5	57.2	67.8
Paper 2B	52.0	67.3	48.4	66.0	36.4	54.0
Difference (2A - 2B)	18.0	16.0	21.6	-7.5	20.8	13.8

Table 6c: Percentage difference between the average marks obtained in the 2011 and 2012 papers

	<i>Oral</i>	<i>Listening</i>	<i>Language Use</i>	<i>Comprehension</i>	<i>Writing Task</i>	Total (100)
Paper 2A	1.3	-6.0	2.0	8.0	6.4	2.3
Paper 2B	2.0	-6.6	0	-16.5	-2.0	-4.6

The differences, summarized as percentage points in Table 6c, indicate that this year students who opted for Paper A did better in the listening task but the marks decreased in the other sections of the paper.

Comments on the candidates' performance

The recommendations and comments made in this report are aimed at prospective candidates and all teachers of Italian in Secondary Schools.

Paper 1 Part 1: oral / aural skills

Speaking skills were weighted at 15% and the test consisted of three exercises, namely a role-play, 'extended speech' (which involved a brief presentation of a set text chosen and read by the candidate) and a free conversation.

The marking scheme used by examiners (this part of the examination is conducted by a separate set of examiners) was based on the following aspects:

- (1) the candidate's ability to interact **spontaneously** and **autonomously** in a conversation.
- (2) the candidate's ability to communicate coherently in Italian, giving priority to **communicative skills** and **strategies**.

Some of the examiners involved in this part of the examination commented on the fact that there are still quite a few candidates who presented themselves for this examination and could not utter a single word in Italian, or depended totally on the examiner's prompt in order to say a few words. One has to keep in mind that in this part of the examination, marks are mainly determined on the basis of the candidate's ability to communicate effectively in Italian, rather than on grammatical correctness.

The Role Play:

Once again this year's role plays took the form of a conversation; situations included buying from shops and talking to Italian friends. The roles candidates had to take included giving or asking for information and explaining a particular situation.

It is imperative that candidates practise speaking skills 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.

The 'Extended Speech':

Unfortunately a number of examiners involved in this part of the examination commented on the fact that there were candidates who presented themselves for this examination without having read any of the set texts. Even more worrying is the fact that some students were not even aware that there existed a list of set books as specified in the SEC syllabus for Italian. The examination syllabus needs to be adhered to as otherwise students will be penalized and lose precious marks during the examination.

The Free Conversation:

Candidates were asked to talk about two topics of a general nature, varying from sports to music, from hobbies to school life, etc. The examiners helped the students by asking them questions and giving them prompts. Examiners felt that candidates were more at ease with this exercise when compared to the role play, and the vast majority reached the desired level of Italian.

Listening skills were weighted at 15% and the test consisted of two exercises. In the first exercise, candidates were required to match comic strips to news items; in the second exercise, they listened to two short texts (which reproduced a radio programme and a news item on radio) on which they were to answer questions in writing. The questions asked assessed a number of enabling skills, including listening for detail, listening for gist, working out the meaning from the 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 and included:

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

- matching
- multiple choice

The candidates' performance in the listening part of the examination was satisfactory, showing that the chosen texts which by and large correspond to the B1-(initial) B2 range of the CEFR are indeed within the reach of the abilities of most Maltese candidates.

Paper 1 Part 2: Language Use

Candidates are allowed one hour and a quarter to complete this paper, the last component of Paper 1 which is common to all candidates. It requires metalinguistic and analytical skills, and the tasks set in Section A test the candidates' accurate use of the language covering knowledge of spelling, morphology, vocabulary, syntax, structures and sociolinguistic competence whereas Section B tests Culture.

Section A (Language) was composed of a total of ten varied exercises:

- Exercise 1: Testing vocabulary (recognition)
- Exercise 2: Testing grammar: verbs (production)
- Exercise 3: Testing vocabulary (recognition)
- Exercise 4: Testing grammar: pronouns (production)
- Exercise 5: Testing grammar: spelling (production)
- Exercise 6: Testing vocabulary (production)
- Exercise 7: Testing grammar functions (recognition)
- Exercise 8: Testing grammar: prepositions (production)
- Exercise 9: Testing grammar: verbs (production)
- Exercise 10: Testing vocabulary (production)

As stated in the 2011 report, most students who sit for their SEC Italian examination face difficulties in order to complete formal grammatical exercises correctly. The main objective of this paper is to test Language Use. Therefore the items included in the 2012 paper included vocabulary and grammatical concepts which may be useful in order to communicate correctly in Italian. They are basic concepts which should not require a great effort to be learnt. Furthermore, 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. For this reason, as already stated in the 2011 report, one should keep in mind that it is more important **to consolidate the basic grammatical notions** (namely the basic verb tenses, noun and adjective morphology, articles, prepositions, pronouns, basic conjunctions and adverbs) rather than devote a large amount of time to grammatical concepts that are less useful at a communicative level. Needless to say that 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.

Section B (Culture) was composed of three exercises:

Exercise 1: Testing the candidates' ability on basic aspects of Italian culture like monuments, newspapers, famous localities, etc.

Exercise 2: Testing the candidates' ability to join the names of famous landmarks, piazzas, monuments, etc to Italian cities.

Exercise 3: Testing the candidates' cultural knowledge through a multiple choice exercise.

The majority of the candidates fared very well in all three exercises. As in 2011, the main objective of devising these exercises was to use **cultural notions to test language use**, keeping in line with the main goal behind the introduction of the Culture component at SEC level.

Comprehensions

The candidates' **reading skills** were tested by means of two texts for each Paper (A & B) on which questions were asked. 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 in both papers included short answer questions, reference questions, true and false questions requiring candidates to give a reason for their answers, and eliciting the meaning of words or phrases. This format was very similar to the one adopted in previous years, with questions set to test a varied amount of skills including skimming, scanning, inference and vocabulary. The two texts in each paper varied in topic and in type thus allowing the examiners to achieve a more accurate picture of the candidates' reading abilities.

All texts in this section of the paper were taken either from Italian newspapers or from Italian websites. One hopes that the inclusion of such texts in the exam paper will encourage access to online Italian newspapers.

Writing tasks

The writing tasks set in the paper consisted of a short task (approximately 50 words) and a longer task (approximately 200 words for Paper IIA and 150 words for Paper IIB). All the tasks assigned were communicative in nature and simulated situations which one could be required to write about in real-life.

From a grammatical point of view, most of the errors committed were similar to those which are already listed both in the 2010 as well as in the 2011 MATSEC report. The following list is not a comprehensive one, but includes errors and limitations which should not go by unnoticed:

- spelling mistakes:

- the use of the 'h' and the 'i' in syllables *chi, che, ghi, ghe, cio, cia, ciu, gio, gia, giu*;
- inclusion of Maltese characters (especially 'k' and 'j');
- -*gno, -gna* incorrectly represented as -*nio; nia*;
- the incorrect use of double consonants, especially in suffixes like -*zione, -ativo, -atico* (e.g. *informazzione; comunicattivo*);
- distinction between *a/ha; o/ho; ce/c'è; voi/vuoi; poi/puoi*;
- accents which in some scripts are non-existent;

- morphology:

- use of the articles (countless errors in the case of masculine nouns ending in -*ma*, in the use of the singular articles *lo* and *l'* and in the plural articles *le* and *gli*);
- many mistakes in incorrect article-noun agreement e.g. **l'autori*;
- numerous mistakes in masculine nouns assigned feminine plural or vice-versa e.g. *le sorpresi*);
- use of pronouns (countless errors in the distinction between *li/gli*);
- possessive forms (numerous errors in the use of the possessives, especially in the use of *mie/miei; tue/tuoi; sue/suoi*);
- prepositions (many errors in the use of *in / a* and in the use of *preposizioni articolate*; cases of negative transfer e.g. *sulla televisione*);
- verbs:
 - errors in verb morphology, confusion between verb endings of the different conjugations;
 - over-extension of use of verbs in the present tense (used even to refer to past actions);
 - limited use of the Conditional mode, even in contexts where one is making a request;

- syntax:

- very long or very short sentences;
- connective devices often limited to 'e' and 'ma'.
- incorrect, incomplete or incoherent syntactic order;
- textuality;
- vocabulary, at times lots of repetition; in some cases candidates barely possess survival vocabulary;
- punctuation, at times non-existent (countless mistakes in the use of full stops and commas);
- lack of paragraphs.

Conclusion

As in previous years, the outcome of the 2012 SEC Italian examination gives a clear indication that a considerable number of candidates do reach the levels as established by the B1 threshold of the CEFR. This does not mean, however, that there is no room for improvement. On the contrary, in some areas there is certainly vast room for improvement and one expects a better level of language competence, especially where reading and writing are concerned. Candidates can achieve a good command of the language through constant exposition to the language through listening, speaking, reading and writing (rather than merely learning about the language); ideally this is done from as early as possible in their learning career.

Chairperson
Board of Examiners
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