

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

MAY 2014

EXAMINERS' REPORT

MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE
EXAMINATIONS' BOARD

**SEC ENGLISH LANGUAGE
MAY 2014 SESSION
EXAMINERS' REPORT**

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1.0 GENERAL INFORMATION AND STATISTICS

A complement of 5146 candidates registered for the May 2014 SEC English examination. Out of these, there were 2991 candidates who opted for Paper A and 2155 candidates who sat for Paper B.

YEAR	NUMBER OF CANDIDATES	% PAPER A	% PAPER B
2014	5146	58.1	41.9
2013	5121	56.7	43.3
2012	5326	54.0	46.0
2011	5372	53.2	46.8
2010	5692	50.9	49.1

TABLE 1 – Percentage of candidates sitting for Paper A and Paper B

1.1 Absences

Out of the registered candidates, there was a total of 92 candidates who were absent for all the components of the examination. Out of these, 29 were Paper A applicants and 62 applicants, by far a larger number, were Paper B candidates.

YEAR	PAPER A		PAPER B		TOTAL	
2014	29	0.7%	63	1.2%	92	1.8%
2013	14	0.3%	49	1%	63	1.2%
2012	11	0.2%	126	2.4%	137	2.6%
2011	22	0.4%	123	2.3%	145	2.7%
2010	27	0.5%	148	2.6%	175	3.1%

TABLE 2 – Number and percentage of absentees in Paper A and Paper B

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The overall performance of the cohort sitting for SEC English May 2014 is indicated below:

GRADE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	U	ABS	TOTAL
PAPER A	188	578	747	675	474			300	29	2991
PAPER B				143	405	427	509	608	63	2155
TOTAL	188	578	747	818	879	427	509	908	92	5146
% OF TOTAL	3.65	11.23	14.52	15.90	17.08	8.30	9.89	17.64	1.79	100

TABLE 3 – Grade Distribution for SEC English Language May 2014

1.3 SEC English Language

The English SEC examination is designed to test the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in two papers, Paper 1 and Paper 2. Each paper carries a total of 100 marks.

Paper 1 is made up of Part 1a, featuring the aural component of listening comprehension (30 marks), Part 1b or the oral component of picture interpretation (10 marks), Part 1c or role play (10 marks) and Part 2 which is made up of the language use component (50 marks).

Paper 2 consists of Part 1 which is the writing component (40 marks) and Part 2, the reading comprehension and brief writing component (60 marks).

Paper 1 is the same for all candidates sitting for SEC English but Paper 2 sets different papers for candidates of Paper A and Paper B, as per SEC syllabus for English Language (2014).

	Percentage weighting of papers %	
Paper 1	15	Part 1a
	5	Part 1b
	5	Part 1c
	25	Part 2
Paper 2	20	Part 1
	30	Part 2

TABLE 4 – Scheme of Assessment

2.1 Paper I Part 1: Listening and Speaking (50 marks)

The oral component in the SEC English Language examination is common to both Paper A and Paper B and consists of three tasks: a listening comprehension, a role play and picture interpretation as a stimulus to conversation. Oral skills are weighted at 10%. This part of the examination paper is conducted by a separate set of examiners. A training session was held prior to the actual examination, during which the procedure and rationale of the different oral components were made familiar to the examiners concerned. During the training session, the examiners were given instructions for reading pace and voice in preparation for the listening comprehension sessions as well as practice in the assessment of candidates for the picture interpretation and role play.

A recorded session using past paper material with participants whose profile is very similar to that of examination candidates and the rating scale intended for the examination were employed. This

exercise ensured standardization among markers and a fair assessment of the candidates' performance.

Listening

a. Listening Comprehension (30 marks)

Paper 1- Part 1 (a) tests the candidate's listening skills in the English language. This component of the examination, assigned a total of 30 marks (15% of the total mark), presented candidates with two texts for listening and tested their understanding by means of a number of tasks. In all, six sessions were set in order to test the whole cohort of candidates. All twelve listening texts were of comparable length and difficulty.

Text A in each session was a transcript of a radio programme on Recent Inventions and gave the story behind the invention of the toaster, the lift, the Barbie doll, blue jeans, Coca-Cola and the Hoover Dam in USA. Understanding was tested by means of a reference task, a True/False task accompanied by a reason, and a task to reorder items of information.

Text B in each session was the transcript of information to visitors at places of historical interest. These places were Leeds Castle, Windsor Castle, Tower of London, Kensington Palace, Hampton Court Palace and Buckingham Palace. Understanding was tested by means of a grid-filling task and multiple-choice vocabulary task.

This variety of tasks ensured that understanding at word level, at paragraph level and whole text level was tested. As has been the case in this paper in recent years, in all the tasks, writing was purposely kept to the barest minimum so that the focus remained on the listening skill.

Speaking

b. Visual Prompt (10 marks)

This task in the oral component normally consists of a visual prompt to generate a brief discussion about topics as dictated by the language area of the syllabus. This year's paper presented two pictures related to daily life. All the pictures were carefully selected to serve only as a springboard for ideas and certainly not to entail scrutiny for detail. The questions were also worded in such a way as to avoid any ambiguity. There were two sets of questions. The three questions in set one were compulsory for all candidates and candidates were expected to describe the pictures, state how the pictures differed from each other and personally relate to the pictures concerned. In set two there were 5 questions and examiners were instructed to ask candidates three of these questions which tackled the relationship between the candidates and the topic in question. Although relating to a different topic, it was ensured that the questions on each topic followed the same pattern.

c. Role-play (10 marks)

This component of the speaking examination requires the candidates to take on a role in a relatively realistic situation. Prompts are provided for a brief exchange to take place between candidate and examiner. Every session always gives an option of two situations which present parallel contexts and similar prompts to test the competence of the candidates to develop and conclude a dialogue and to express some functions, as dictated by the syllabus.

This year, the first role play situation required the candidate to take on either the role of the examiner's friend who argues against animal cruelty or against the building of a new supermarket in the town/village/sport outlet instead of a public garden. The second situation also involved the

candidate in the role of a friend who argues against or in favour of a dangerous sport. All sessions had five numbered prompts to better guide the candidates in their responses. The prompts were uniform across all role plays.

PERFORMANCE

a. Listening Comprehension

The candidates may generally be considered quite competent in their listening skills. Overall, candidates performed better in the tasks set on Text B than in those on Text A.

Text A:

Task 1: Reference (5 marks)

The reference task proved to be the most challenging for all candidates, not so much in the actual listening comprehension involved but mainly in the recording of the responses. Marks were lost when candidates gave incomplete responses, making no actual mention of the item of reference being asked for but instead just jotting down the item of information associated with the given dates/numbers. For example in session 1, task 1a, for the item of reference 6000, candidates wrote *when bread was eaten* but failed to mention *the number of years when bread was eaten* hence lack of specificity.

Task 2: True/False statements and reason (5 marks)

The true/false task was attempted well by a good number of candidates. Yet there were instances when candidates correctly stated whether the statement was true or false but provided the wrong reason or vice versa.

Question 3: Ordering items of information (5 marks)

In the third task the majority fared well getting the sequence of statements all correct.

Text B:

The majority of candidates scored highly in this section. Both exercises were straightforward and most candidates seem to have understood the information given.

Task 1: Grid-filling (8 marks)

The candidates did well in this task; this was partly due to the responses being brief — a date or a one-word answer in most cases. Yet again, marks were lost for carelessness.

Task 2: Multiple-choice Vocabulary (6 marks)

Candidates did well in this task which tested the candidates' understanding of seven lexical items in the text.

Overall, it can be said that candidates are generally competent in their listening skills yet there were instances when scores were low because of the candidates i. not being specific in their answers and ii. not paying attention to the rubric/words in the grid. More preparation related to examination technique is required in this respect.

b. Picture Interpretation and c. Role Play

The absolute majority of Paper A candidates did very well in the speaking component of the examination whilst the Paper B candidates did not fare too badly either. Overall it appears that candidates perform better in (b) probably because this component does not involve any reading and hence offers virtually no problems of comprehension.

As has been the case in previous years, the candidates who did well followed the cues or prompts given and delivered their responses quite smoothly. Those who struggled to obtain a good or average mark in this component of the paper did so because i. they missed the prompts or even ignored them completely, and thus did not manage to complete the task set and/or ii. they could not communicate in the language – they produced language rife with grammatical inaccuracies, limited vocabulary and frequently the use of Maltese words as fillers.

2.2 PAPER 1 Part 2: Language Use (50 marks)

The second component of Paper 1 tests the candidates' competence in English language use. This component of the examination, assigned a total of 50 marks, presented candidates with nine tasks designed to test their knowledge and their use of different grammatical points and structures of the English language as required in different contexts of everyday life. This write-on paper tests both accuracy and appropriateness of the language.

Exercise 1 tested the candidates' competence in the forming of opposites by the addition of a prefix. The majority fared reasonably well in this task. The most challenging items were number 3 – *dissimilar*, and number 6 – *misplaced*. There were several candidates who included the hyphen thus losing all the marks for the exercise.

Exercise 2 tested the candidates' familiarity with phrasal verbs. Most did well in this exercise yet numbers 6 and 10 seem to have been problematic: instead of *put off* (number 6) many wrote *put down* while instead of *died out* (number 10) many wrote *dried out*. This task which involved underlining the correct option helped the candidates gain scores, primarily as no writing/spelling was involved.

Exercise 3 tested the candidates' ability in word formation. The majority gained an average score managing to form 1-8 correctly (though *behaviour* in 2 and *retrieving* in 5 were misspelt by a significant number of candidates). Number 9 posed the greatest difficulty with only a handful forming *inconclusive* while many got number 10 wrong because they failed to take note of subject-verb-agreement and wrote *observations* instead of *observation*.

Exercise 4 tested the candidates' ability to use link words. All items appear to have been challenging to a large number of candidates. Some showed that they did not know how to use the link words given: for example, in number 4 they wrote *such as* or *however* instead of *in fact*; in number 6 they gave *therefore*, *however* and *since* instead of *despite*; in number 9 many used *nonetheless* instead of *moreover*. There were also candidates who failed to put numbers 1,4,6,7 and 9 in capital letters thus forfeiting the mark.

Exercise 5 tested the candidates' knowledge of idiomatic expressions. This task was quite challenging with candidates not managing a 3/5 score. The better known idioms were 2,3,6,7,9 and 10 whereas number 1 *dicing with death*, number 4 *black and blue*, number 5 *to cap it all* (most wrote *cap it up*) and number 8 *water off a duck's back* proved to be beyond the candidates' competence.

Exercise 6 was an exercise in the use of modal verbs. This exercise showed that a good number of the candidates have not yet mastered the knowledge and the use of modality. Answers such as *must of left* for number 2 and *better start* for number 10 were common while number 3 *need not have taken* proved to be particularly challenging in the sequential use of the negative of the particle.

Exercise 7 was a cloze exercise. Many candidates struggled with this task producing words that did not collocate appropriately in the given context with numbers 2,4,6, and 8 proving the most challenging. There were instances of correct answers but with incorrect spelling such as *aloud* instead of *allowed* in number 9 and *baned* instead of *banned* in number 10. In number 9, too, there were quite a few candidates who did not notice the negative in the sentence and gave answers in the negative.

Exercise 8 tested the candidates' correct use of the tenses. Performance was, on the whole, disappointing. There were particular problems with agreement especially in number 10 where *have been redesigning* was given instead of *has been redesigning*. A few candidates are still weak when it comes to the use of the Present Simple and Present Continuous tenses as in numbers 2 and 4, and in the use of the Present Perfect as in number 10. Very few answered Number 8 correctly, giving *withdrewn* and *withdrewed* rather than *withdrew*. Many used the Past Tense throughout. This task showed once more that the majority of the candidates had no idea of the correct tense to use.

Exercise 9 required candidates to rewrite sentences in a context in such a way that the meaning remained the same. There was much room for improvement in this task. The most common mistakes were: number 1, verb *get used to* followed by verb *-ing* construction; the comparative *as-as* in number 3 and the verb sequence in reported speech in number 5.

The tasks set were varied and well within the cohort's competence. Yet overall, candidates need to remember that this is a paper that tests accuracy and that spelling, punctuation and grammar rules such as subject-verb agreement, for example, are very important.

3.1 PAPER 2 Question 1: Writing (40 marks)

In this section of the paper, candidates were required to write fluently and accurately on a title of their own choice from those presented. The candidates who opted for Paper 2A were expected to develop their writing in 320-350 words whereas the candidates who registered for Paper 2 B had to develop their task in 180-200 words.

In both Paper 2A and Paper 2B, tasks were set to test the candidates' familiarity with three genres that are quite common and that they will surely need to produce at some time in their lives, that is, writing a story, presenting an article and sending a formal email. Candidates were specifically instructed to pay attention to aspects of vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation.

In Paper 2 A and Paper 2 B, all three tasks in each paper were attempted, but to varying degrees. The numbers below give a clear indication of the choice made by the candidates:

TASK TYPE	PAPER 2A %	PAPER 2B %
Short story	52.1%	43.6%
Article	19.7%	26.1%
Email	28.2%	30.3%

TABLE 5 – Percentage distribution of writing tasks in Paper 2 question 1

PERFORMANCE

In the writing task marks were awarded for:

- i. content and development
- ii. fluency
- iii. grammatical accuracy

1. **Content & Development**

Paper 2A

Question 1: The Narrative

Candidates were required to write a short story entitled 'The Hiding Place' to be published in the school magazine. A large percentage of the candidates chose this title, proving once again the popularity of the narrative genre with Paper A candidates. A very common storyline revolved around a hiding place as understood in the game of *Hide and Seek*, in which the candidates typically explained how they stumbled upon a very good hiding place and then gave a detailed description of it. Many associated the title with an abandoned house which, very often, would be in a forest. Tree houses, secret passageways leading to an idyllic place and hidden treasures also figured. Interestingly enough, a significant, though not large, number of candidates wrote about the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany and how these hid from the German soldiers.

Giving the right weight to the different sections in a writing task story, was, as in previous years, a common problem among candidates. A number of compositions had lengthy introductions which resulted in loss of marks. For instance candidates wrote in unnecessary detail a lengthy build-up to the incident which should have revolved around finding, entering and describing the hiding place. Other candidates wrote stories in which the hiding place figured at the very end. This imbalance caused candidates to lose marks due to the poor organization of their work. In terms of organization of ideas, too, candidates were penalized for lack of proper paragraphing and cohesion between paragraphs. There was a marked absence of linking words. In some cases, the essay was written as one whole paragraph and was lacking in punctuation.

There were several essays that lacked originality yet the language was correct and idiomatic earning them a good mark. Candidates that scored well produced well-organised and sequenced short stories with convincing characterization, adequate setting and atmosphere and most important of all, an original and surprising plot.

In general, many candidates who chose this title went over the word limit, losing marks as a result.

Question 2: The Article

Candidates were required to write an article entitled 'Young people need more discipline at home and at school' to be published in a school magazine. This was the least popular choice with 2A candidates.

Those who opted for this task seemed quite confident in expressing their views on the subject. A good percentage organized their ideas reasonably well, presenting sound arguments regarding the importance of having disciplined home and school environments. Many, however, seemed unaware of the fact that the central theme was that young people **need more discipline** rather than just discipline at home and at school.

A few candidates misconstrued the objective of the set task and wrote an argumentative essay presenting arguments in favour of and against discipline at home and at school. The balance of the argument was compromised in other instances particularly when candidates devoted too much time to one domain and very little to the other, blaming, for example, the home domain for lack of discipline in today's young people and only mentioning the school domain as an afterthought. A few mistook the article for a formal letter giving a signature at the end.

Another point worth mentioning is the notion of the 'target reader'. A number of candidates failed to keep their readers in mind, who, in this case, were teenage students and a few went so far as to address the parents and/or teachers giving them advice on how to discipline teenagers and why. Students should be encouraged to read the rubric carefully and make sure they understand what is expected of them before putting pen to paper.

Question 3: The Email

Most of the candidates who opted for this question achieved the required task quite well. The question involved writing to the Mayor complaining about the fact that an abandoned house in their neighbourhood had become a favourite meeting spot for criminal activity and making some suggestions as to how the situation could be remedied.

In tackling the first part of the question most candidates were able to define the term 'criminal activity', associating it with drug dealing, prostitution, robberies, hiding stolen goods and other criminal acts. There were some candidates, however, who failed to pinpoint any sort of criminal activity that might require the Mayor's intervention. Some even complained that the people in the neighbourhood were being kept awake at night by the supposed 'criminals' partying in the abandoned house. A significant number related a particular incident that occurred in the house. As regards the second part of the question, among the suggestions one could find the setting up of CCTV cameras, having police officers patrol the neighbourhood, asking the owner of the property to take responsibility for it or having the police force break in to catch the criminals in the act.

A noticeable problem was that of the organisation of ideas. Some candidates focused too much on the criminal activities and only mentioned what they thought should be done in a few lines. Others left out the second part of the question altogether. This resulted in an imbalanced essay and marks were consequently lost.

In terms of format, apart from the fact that a relatively small number of candidates left out the grid completely, most candidates employed the correct structure. Yet a number of candidates seemed oblivious of the fact that the subject of an email should be concise, and provided sentence-long subjects. Unfortunately all but a few knew that starting an email with 'Dear Mayor' or 'To whom it may concern' is inappropriate. Quite a number concluded incorrectly by only writing their first name or forgetting to sign off using the name provided in the question itself.

Furthermore, in many cases, candidates used informal language and contractions thus ignoring the fact that they were supposed to be writing a formal email. Better is expected of 2A candidates.

Paper 2B

Question 1: The Narrative

For this task candidates were required to write a short story for the school magazine starting with the sentence 'My sisters Emily and Rachel keep blaming me for what happened on that day three months ago.'

Regrettably, the performance of the candidates who opted for this question ranged from average to unsatisfactory. The storylines were, in most cases, puerile. Most candidates showed a lack of imagination writing about the persona being blamed for, among other things, accidentally leaving the front door open resulting in the dog running out and being run over, or someone getting hurt while on a hike or for their sisters missing or being late for a party. Surely these are not things that happen that would make anyone assign blame for after three months have passed, the story behind the blame not being convincing enough to justify the source of blame. Some stories did not bring out well the reason why the sisters would blame the persona while for the most part candidates failed to link the narrative to the 'blame' issue in the rubric.

There were a significant number of essays that lacked proper organization. A common mistake that featured was the writing of long introductions which were irrelevant to the story. In certain cases candidates realized that they had to be blamed for something halfway through the essay or even at the very end which meant that most of the essay was taken up with details which were

not entirely relevant to the narrative. Furthermore, the stories were sometimes too dragging and failed to reach the desired climax.

Question 2: The Article

Candidates here were required to write an article for a young people's website entitled 'Mobile phones should be allowed at school'. This was the least popular choice with the candidates despite the fact that the subject is appealing to teenagers.

In general, the standard of the essays ranged from average to mediocre with many candidates being at a loss when it came to expressing their views clearly. It was evident that the weaker candidates, finding it difficult to express their views, struggled for ideas. The arguments presented were weak and tended to be repetitive, and ranged from the need to have a mobile phone to be able to reach family members should an emergency arise to having a phone to pass the time during break, taking a photo of work on the whiteboard rather than copying it and contacting boy/girl friends. Some arguments were directed towards the idea that if teachers are allowed to have a mobile phone at school so should students.

A common problem in a significant number of essays was that candidates mistook the title for an argumentative essay rather than an exposition. They therefore discussed the advantages and disadvantages of allowing mobile phones at school, thus rendering the essay partly irrelevant. Some candidates, thinking this was a pros or cons essay wrote exclusively against students having mobile phones at school when the question clearly asked them to agree. In all, more often than not the element of persuasion was either weak or totally omitted.

Both introduction and conclusion were generally worryingly mediocre with many simply repeating the title or stating that *like everything in life mobile phones have their good and their bad*. A significant number of candidates too failed to use the article format, writing essays that were lacking in paragraphing and an appropriate style. Most of the essays were within the 200 word limit.

Question 3: The Email

In this writing task the candidates were required to write an email to the Mayor of their local council suggesting what a house in their locality earmarked to be converted into a youth centre or daycare centre for the elderly should be used for.

A number of candidates misunderstood the meaning of 'converted' and wrote about building a youth centre or daycare centre for the elderly instead. Some candidates ignored the two options of a youth centre or a centre for the elderly and just came up with their own ideas thus showing that they had not understood the question. A significant number compromised by advising the local council to use the lower floor to set up a daycare centre for the elderly and the upper floor as a youth centre. These essays were judged as partly out of point. It is only fair to state, however, that there were a few candidates, obviously the best ones, who provided valid and varied reasons why the house should be converted into the one or the other of the two options. These essays made interesting reading.

Regrettably, the vast majority of the candidates showed a poor knowledge of the way a formal email should be written. Many failed to use the correct mode of address and resorted to the unacceptable *Dear Mayor* or *To whom it may concern* or even *Dear Local council* followed in quite a number of essays by *I am Jess Saliba* as part of the introduction. Others used less formal structures in the closure such as *Yours* or omitted the salutation completely. The language used was, more often than not, informal with some even going to the extent of asking the Mayor how he was. Candidates were also penalized for using contractions, which cannot be allowed in a formal email, as well as slang and literal translations from Maltese.

General remarks

A basic requirement is essentially task achievement and relevance. In the narrative essay the title was expected to be understood, the characterisation convincing and the sequence of events realistic. The candidates' point of view in the article had to be clearly expressed and within the parameters set by the rubric while careful consideration to the aim of the email was expected to be given before writing.

As stated before, candidates lost marks for not fulfilling the requirements of the title. Many of the essays were by and large in point yet only a relatively small number showed imagination and the maturity expected of 15-16 year olds and were awarded marks for originality of ideas.

Candidates need to work on understanding the rubric well and following the instructions it presents. Even while writing, candidates have to keep in mind the importance of checking that what they are writing is relevant. In all three genres marks were awarded if the work was interesting and relevant.

Candidates were also expected to organize their work well and present their ideas in an orderly way. Although there were several attempts by candidates to use the blank space on the examination paper for planning, this was very much underused. As a result, the organization was flawed and the writing task was uncontrolled and lacked coherence. Linking words **between** paragraphs and **within** paragraphs were unfortunately limited, the ones repetitively used being *because* (often spelt *cos*), *as*, *then*, *and*, *but*. Paragraphing is a skill that needs to be addressed, especially by 2B candidates, many of whom failed to use any paragraphs at all.

2. Fluency

The criteria were based on (i) the ability to use a range of vocabulary clearly and appropriately and (ii) the ability to use the language appropriately and in accordance with the task in hand.

(i) Vocabulary: Although the better Paper 2A candidates used a wide range of suitable vocabulary, the same cannot be said for a significant number of candidates, the paper 2B candidates in particular. The repetitive use of the same vocabulary prevailed and it was noted that this limited range therefore hindered candidates from expressing their ideas. Many candidates used words inaccurately. This was especially true when it came to distinguishing between *ground* and *floor*, *make* and *do*, *teach* and *learn*, these being just a few examples. The use of direct translation from Maltese remains persistent. The use of slang and American diction too, seems to have become a common trait with *gonna* standing out in many essays.

(ii) Overall, the main problem was the lack of linguistic competence, with many candidates showing a poor mastery of sentence structure. There were many instances of never-ending sentences, sometimes as long as a whole paragraph, resulting in the sentence losing its focus. A syntactical mistake that kept appearing over and over again was *Me and my friends/neighbours/sisters/family*, etc. A lack of cohesion within a sentence was evident too in sentences where pronouns were switched as in, for example, **One** needs to have a mobile phone at school as **you** may want to phone.. In many cases, especially in the article, few candidates were capable of using the non-sexist pronouns *they/them* to refer to an individual of either sex as, for example, *A student may need to phone his mother* rather than the non-sexist **their** mother.

3. Grammatical accuracy

One marvels at the high degree of inaccuracy in a substantial number of the essays in spite of candidates being specifically instructed to pay attention to grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Grammar

There was a high incidence of grammatical errors, with a significant number of candidates showing, regrettably, that they have not mastered the basic rules. To start with, the tenses seem

to have posed the greatest problem, even at this stage when the candidates have been exposed to English language at school for at least ten years. A very great number of both Paper 2A and Paper 2B candidates (the latter especially) demonstrated a very poor grasp of the tenses. There was a constant shifting of tenses mostly in the narrative task while students used the Past and Present Continuous/ Perfect tenses when the Simple Past tense was called for. In the article and the email, in particular, the Future *will* and the conditional *would* were used indiscriminately. Other candidates seemed to be aware of only the Present Simple and the Past Simple. Another weakness where tenses are concerned appeared in the formation of the simple Past and/or the Past participle as in *happend, maked, hitted, don't tooked, they have never saw*, to cite a few examples. Errors, as for instance, the use of the misrelated participle, *Walking down the street a bus ran over him*, and no agreement between subject and verb, as in *they likes* or *he cry*, were frequent. Mistakes were also made in the use of the relative pronoun, with many showing an inability to distinguish between *who* and *which* and, in a few cases, the use of the personal pronouns *we/us, I/me*.

Spelling

Although the level of spelling has risen slightly this year from what it was last year, the level of spelling especially in the 2B scripts was extremely poor. There was rampant misspelling of words in everyday use: *it's/its, there/their, hole/whole, were/wear, hear/here/her, alot/a lot*. Other misspelt words included *realy, happend, definitely*, to cite a few examples while there were candidates who even spelt words copied from the rubric such as *abandoned, elderly, neighbourhood, mayor* incorrectly. There were, however, a few instances when the candidates had flawless spelling even when content, organization, vocabulary and syntax were poor.

Punctuation

Punctuation was, in a significant number of essays, abysmal. Candidates showed poor mastery of punctuation, the majority using only commas and full stops or a comma when no comma was needed. It was also noted that in a good number of cases candidates seemed unaware of the difference between a comma and a full stop and thus used them indiscriminately. Very few indeed made use of the other punctuation marks: the colon, semi-colon, exclamation and question marks. There was also consistent misuse of the apostrophe with candidates confusing plurals and possessives such as *my sisters' were in the criminals car*. A certain negligence surfaced in the candidates' haphazard use of the capital letter, with capital letters appearing in mid-sentences unnecessarily, and in the persistence of many in using *i* for *I*. Candidates planning to sit for their SEC examination in English Language need to recognise the need for, and the importance of good punctuation.

The above comments generally point to failings in the candidates' writing. However, they are made with a purpose namely to serve as guidelines. Overall, a lack of reading with its concomitant lack of thinking skills is becoming alarmingly apparent.

3.2 PAPER 2 Question 2: Reading and Writing (60 marks)

In this component of the paper, a reading comprehension including a summary task and a brief writing task are set, in both Paper A and Paper B. The reading skills tested in the A and B paper 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 the reading skills required of the candidates. The texts in each sitting vary in topic and in type in order to ensure a more accurate representation of the candidates' reading abilities. The reading skills tested range from reading for gist, reading for detail, inference, working out the meaning of vocabulary from the context, summarising part of the information to working out the author's intention. The questions, meant to test the candidates' ability to read, understand, evaluate and interpret the reading material, may consist of multiple-choice questions, short-answer questions, inference questions, questions requiring the locating of information, True and False questions providing a reason and questions requiring the candidate to explain the meaning of a word or phrase. Writing skills are tested at the end of the paper by means of a brief read-and-respond task.

Paper A

This year, the Paper 2A comprehension task featured two reading passages: an informative text about commuting and a narrative text about using a robot to explore Mars. The questions tested candidates on a variety of comprehension skills, including understanding the gist of the information given, understanding at paragraph level, understanding more specific lexical items like expressions and vocabulary, and confirming statements and giving a reason. Following the questions on the first passage, candidates had to write a summary of between 70 and 80 words on the reasons for and effects of long commutes. The brief writing task at the end of the second passage required candidates to write an email of between 60-80 words, inviting a friend to join them to watch a film on space exploration at the cinema.

Syllabus B

This year, the Paper 2B comprehension task featured two reading passages: a personal experience of a journalist in the Upper Guinean forest belt and an informative text about wheelie bins. The two represented very different text types intended to assess candidates' reading skills more widely.

The questions set were similar to those set on the Paper 2A comprehension task and were directed at testing candidates on a variety of comprehension skills, including understanding the gist of the information given, understanding at paragraph level, understanding more specific lexical items like expressions and vocabulary, and confirming statements and giving a reason. The brief writing task at the end required candidates to write a short paragraph (using only between 50-60 words) in the weekly school magazine on what students should do to keep the school clean.

PERFORMANCE: PAPER 2A

Questions on Passage 1

Questions 1a&b & 2

The comprehension skill tested by these questions was that of understanding the gist of the information found in the passage. In question 1a candidates were asked to underline the most appropriate title out of three options and in 1b they were asked to give a reason for having chosen that title. The majority wrongly chose the general title *(i) Commuting* when a more careful reading of the passage would have led them to *(ii) The Rise of the Extreme Commuter*. Question 1b was consequently answered incorrectly. On the other hand in answering question 2 almost all the candidates did well in describing commuting as a *modern day unnecessary evil*.

Questions 3 & 8 tested the candidates' ability to understand at paragraph level. These questions proved to be the least problematic yet whereas a substantial number of the candidates gave a correct answer, many failed to use their own words as instructed.

In *Questions 4, 6 and 9*, candidates were required to infer the meaning of a part sentence quoted from the text and explain it in their own words. In answering question 4 *there are few suits around at that unearthly hour*, many candidates failed to infer what the writer meant by *a few suits* and therefore were only awarded half the marks for explaining *unearthly hour*. In the answers to question 6, it was obvious that a good number of candidates were not familiar with the expression *having a foot* in each location while in question 9, the part sentence *it is difficult to unpick the reasons* posed no problems and most candidates explained it correctly. It has been noted that although a significant number of candidates showed inference skills, difficulties were encountered when it came to explaining the meaning **in their own words**.

In *Question 5* candidates were asked to locate specific information and list the stages of the writer's commute to work. This question does not seem to have presented any problems and almost all the candidates, including those who struggled in the other questions, answered it correctly.

Question 10 too tested the candidates' ability to locate specific information, this time by means of a True or False exercise in which two statements were given and candidates were asked to state whether they were true or false and to provide a logical reason. This exercise was done fairly well.

Question 7 required the candidates to scan read nine lines (lines 13-21) of the text in order to find synonyms for the four words given. Quite a number encountered problems with (i) *definite* and (iv) *merits*.

Question 11 was the summary question. In terms of content, candidates were required to focus on extracting the reasons for and the effects of long commutes. Candidates did quite well when it came to marks awarded for content yet there were a number who summarized the reasons only and did not include the effects which led to a loss of marks. Many candidates also lost marks for making basic grammar and spelling mistakes while some copied word for word from the passage and quite a few went beyond the word limit.

Questions on Passage 2

Questions 1, 4 and 6 were meant to test the candidates' inference skills. In these questions candidates were required to explain the meaning of a part-sentence taken from the text inferring the said meaning from the context. *Question 1* was problematic for many candidates insofar as despite their correct explanation of *mammoth* in *mammoth feat* they failed to explain *feat*, ignored it or repeated it in their answer. They were thus awarded half the marks. *Question 4* was answered correctly on the whole, with the candidates correctly associating the meaning of *as gently as a feather on a target the size of a pea* with the task dealt with in that particular part of the text. There were also a substantial number of candidates who provided a correct explanation of *we sweated over a lot of details* in *question 6*. Yet there were others who did not fully understand the sentence or just rephrased the sentence using the word *sweated*.

In *Questions 3, 5 and 8*, candidates were required to look for specific information in the passage: in *question 3*, to identify four stages of the fieldwork carried out, in *question 5*, four things engineers were concerned about when testing the drill they planned to use on Mars and in *question 8*, two reasons why it was important to practice using the drill on Mars. Most candidates did very well in these questions. It seems that when it came to questions in which candidates were expected to draw up a list of facts from the passage, few problems were encountered.

Questions 2 and 9, which tested the candidates' ability to understand at paragraph level, were answered correctly by the majority of the candidates, even those who struggled to answer the other questions.

In *Question 7* candidates were required to write down two part sentences of not more than five words each which showed that the writer's work caused him anxiety. Most candidates gave a correct answer with a few not keeping to the word limit as instructed.

In *Question 10* candidates had to scan read part of the text to identify four single words opposite in meaning to those provided. A significant number failed to locate these words; numbers (i) *genuine*, (ii) *monotonous* and (iii) *primitive* were the most problematic.

In *Question 11* candidates were given a set of words from the text and asked to explain what they referred to in the passage. Most candidates gave correct answers.

Short Writing Task

Following the two passages, an e-mail of between 60 and 80 words was set in which the candidate was to write to a friend to join them in watching a film on space exploration. The task was achieved by the majority of the candidates and only a few went out of point. A common issue

was length, with many going beyond the 80 word limit. Another problematic area was the greeting/salutation. In some cases the greeting and/or the salutation were missing while in others the greeting *Hey* was too informal and the salutation too formal (*yours sincerely, yours truly*). Other areas of concern were related to grammar: spelling, syntax and missing punctuation, as well as a limited vocabulary.

PERFORMANCE: PAPER 2B

Questions on Passage 1

Questions 1, 2a and 2b were meant to test the candidates' ability to understand the gist of the text. In question 1 they were asked to underline the most appropriate title out of the four options given, in question 2a to state what the writer's job was and in question 2b to give a reason for their answer. Most candidates underlined the wrong title in question 1, choosing (ii) *a travel diary* when a clearer understanding of the text would have led them to (iv) *a travel magazine*. In question 2 many failed to mention a specific profession. It seems that they did not clearly understand what was expected of them. Very few gave a correct answer.

Questions 3 and 4 tested the candidates' ability to understand at paragraph level, locate specific information in the text and render it in their own words. In question 3 candidates were asked to mention 2 reasons for the writer's enjoyment of rafting rainforests, both reasons being in paragraph 2 of the passage. Most candidates gave correct answers. Although many understood question 4, namely why the writer was *speechless*, a substantial number of candidates failed to give a correct answer, not due to lack of comprehension but due to the fact that the answer called for a quantifier which they failed to include.

In Questions 5, 9 and 11, candidates were required to locate facts from the text: in question 5 to draw up a list of four facts about Diana monkeys, in question 9 to draw up a list of six facts about the flu-like symptoms of malaria and in question 11 to draw up a list of six items the writer took with him on his expedition. All three questions were answered satisfactorily.

In Question 6 candidates were asked to lift two part sentences of not more than 3 words from the text which showed that the writer was scared when he met the diamond miners. Most answers were disappointing, with common errors including *an unwelcome intruder/enormous the storm/dangerous* while some candidates copied the phrases incorrectly thus losing marks despite their correct answer.

In Questions 7, 8 and 10, candidates had to show their inference skills by explaining in their own words the meaning of part sentences as used in the passage. Most candidates encountered problems through not knowing the meaning of *teeming* in question 7 and *fret* in question 10. Question 8 was answered correctly by the majority.

Questions 12 and 13 also required candidates to infer meaning from the context, in question 12 giving a reason why the woman *shouted*, and in question 13 saying why they thought the writer was *dragged*. In question 12, instead of explaining **why** the woman shouted, a good number of candidates wrote about **what** she shouted thus changing the meaning of the question. The answers to question 13 were satisfactory on the whole.

Question 15 was a True or False exercise where three statements were given and candidates were asked to state whether each statement was true or false and to provide a suitable logical reason to show their understanding of specific information contained in the text. A significant number of candidates gave correct answers in statements (i) and (ii) but gave an incorrect answer in statement (iii) through failing to understand the word *solely*.

Questions on Passage 2

Questions 1 and 4 tested the candidates' vocabulary at word level: in question 1 they were required to lift two words from the passage that had the same meaning as *bins*, and in question 4 they were directed to twelve lines in the passage and asked to find single words opposite in meaning to six words given in the question. Many candidates gave the right answers to both questions but in question 1 they lost marks due to spelling errors as, for example, copying *receptacles* from the text incorrectly while in question 4 a common error for number (v) *rising* was *down* which showed that the students knew the meaning of *rising* but selected the wrong word from the passage.

Questions 2 and 8 were also vocabulary exercises but this time at phrase level with candidates being asked to explain in their own words part sentences taken from the passage. The answers to both questions given by a substantial number of candidates were far from correct. It seems that candidates encountered problems in questions which involved i. explaining the implied meaning of a phrase taken from the passage and ii. doing it in their own words.

In Questions 3, 9 and 10, candidates were required to locate facts found in the passage. In question 3 they were asked to locate two facts, one about Birmingham and the other about Malvern, in question 9 they had to draw up a list of eight arguments against wheelie bins mentioned in the passage, and in question 10 they were required to write down two benefits of wheelie bins also found in the passage. These questions were handled well on the whole, which is a clear indication that candidates found no difficulty in answering questions that involved lifting the answers from the text.

In Question 5 the candidates' ability to understand at paragraph level was tested. Again, most of the answers were incorrect: it was evident that the candidates did not understand what the writer was implying, namely that the residents were angry at the council when he stated that *residents marched to the council's office with their bins in tow*.

In Question 6 six words, consisting mainly of pronouns, were given and candidates were asked to explain what they referred to. The majority answered the question correctly.

Questions 7a and b tested the candidates' ability to understand the gist of the passage. Three options dealing with the writer's attitude towards wheelie bins were given and candidates were to choose one and give a reason for their choice. Unfortunately very few gave a correct answer.

Short Writing Task

Candidates were required to write a short paragraph of between 50 and 60 words for a school magazine making suggestions on what students should do to keep the school clean. Marks here were lost for a number of reasons:

i. many misunderstood the question and wrote in general about the amount of litter left lying around at school by students without making any suggestions; ii. good sentence structures and grammatical accuracy were lacking; iii. there were even problems with basic spelling and punctuation.

There were also quite a number of candidates who went beyond the word limit or did not attempt the task at all.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Overall, it appears that candidates performed relatively well in the oral and aural components of the paper. However, one cannot but notice the different level of performance in the writing components. In a piece of free writing such as a paragraph, an email, an essay or even the use of their own words in answering a question, the candidates were weak in the use of the English

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language. Examiners have reported that inadequate levels of grammatical accuracy, spelling, punctuation and expression were very much in evidence as was direct translation from Maltese.

It is of great concern that 16-year old students should be leaving school with such a poor command of the language after having been exposed to it throughout their school life. If standards are to rise there has to be a greater effort on the society as a whole to instil in students an increased awareness of the importance of English as an international language. More too should be done to practise the language in all its forms and for it not to be merely regarded as a school subject. Only then could there be a marked improvement in candidates' performance in the future.

*Chairperson
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