UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
THE MATRICULATION EXAMINATION

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

ENGLISH

MAY 2015

EXAMINERS’ REPORT

MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE
EXAMINATIONS BOARD
1.0 Overview

The table below gives a summary of results for IM English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADE</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Abs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Candidates</td>
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<td>428</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>137</td>
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<td>28</td>
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<td>10.11</td>
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The table above indicates a trend of improvement in candidates’ average performance over that of previous years. In particular, the percentage of candidates obtaining an E grade has dropped this year, and a higher number of candidates are now distributed across the B-D grade range. The percentage of candidates obtaining an F grade has also remained similar to previous years, suggesting that on the whole, candidates have been able to prepare relatively well for this exam and understand what is expected of their performance. This report presents detailed feedback from the Board of Examiners for this exam, for each section of the paper, indicating in particular, areas where improvements can be made.

2.0 Oral Paper

As in previous years, it is noted by speaking examiners that those candidates who have had ample opportunity to directly engage in spoken English communication perform much better in this part of the exam than those candidates who have had little or no similar opportunities. It is therefore highly recommended that students are given more opportunity to communicate in English, even if such opportunities do not take the form of the exam format, but are worked into other activities as necessary. It is naturally important that candidates are familiar with the rubric of the speaking exam as this familiarity allows for a better flow of the allotted time. However, beyond the rubric itself, broader communication skills in English help candidates to cope better with this exam and are therefore to be encouraged as part of exam preparation and practice.

2.1 Reading Aloud

After a brief introduction from the examiner, this section of the exam is used by examiners to gauge a candidate's overall intelligibility in pronunciation, reading pace and ability to appropriately present a coherent reading of a given text. On the whole, candidates are able to perform well in this section, although longer words (3 syllables or more) often present difficulties and cause candidates to hesitate or lose fluency. As candidates are given time to prepare their readings in advance, it may help them if preparation for this section of the exam were to focus in part on English sound structure, and the patterns of pronunciation and word stress for longer words, so that candidates have something concrete to focus on during their reading time.

2.2 Long Turn

Here, candidates are expected to speak alone for an extended period of time on a given topic requiring minimal or no intervention from the examiner. The candidate is assessed on their range of grammatical structures and vocabulary, and the extent to which these enhance fluency and self-expression in English. Here, examiners remark, perhaps in an echo of what is also noted in the language essay (see Section 3.1 below), that candidates would benefit from focusing on a clearer structure and better organisation of their discourse. Frequently, the stronger candidates rely on their good fluency to speak at length, but not necessarily with great degrees of coherence, while the weaker candidates are unable to sustain their speaking time for any reasonable length, and require added support or prompting from the examiner. Opportunities to practise the organisation of discourse would no doubt help in exam preparation and may well have the additional benefit of sensitising candidates to the benefits of broader organisational skills which could also be extended to written work.
3.0 Written Paper

Feedback on the written paper is divided into the three sections of the exam format. The general comment from examiners is that apart from focusing on effective language usage, candidates need to attain greater depth or maturity in their consideration of the questions at hand. The practice of approaching questions at too superficial a level was often noted across all three sections of the paper, although it is often most evident in the literature section where candidates are required to engage critically with a given text that they should be comfortably familiar with. At this level, a superficial reading of an essay question, comprehension passage or a given literary work can compromise the candidate's ability to perform at the top of their range.

3.1 Section A – Language, Essay

General Comments

As noted earlier in Section 2.2, a poor grasp of strategies which would help in the organisation of a longer piece of writing or speaking often results in the candidate being unable to fully control their output in essay writing. In particular, the specific genre required by a particular essay title is frequently ignored, suggesting that candidates sometimes have a limited understanding of how their writing needs to adapt to particular contexts. Examples include the rubric in an essay title requesting a report format and sometimes also in titles requesting a short story. In both cases, candidates often simply resort to the narration of a series of events which are sometimes only very loosely related to the given title. Such answers cannot be awarded high marks as they suggest that the candidate has not understood what kind of language, or indeed what kind of format, is required of them.

A further remark on relevance highlights the concern that in some cases, essay titles dealing with common themes such as the environment, climate change, local society etc., seem to prompt rather repetitive ideas both within an individual essay, as well as across larger numbers of essays. One possible reason for this is that candidates sometimes choose to fall back on half remembered essays worked in class, and rely on recall, rather than on language skills, to produce the required work. Unfortunately, this strategy almost always results in a disorganised presentation of ideas and a reliance on formulaic chunking of language which does not help the candidate. The same remark applies generally to the overuse of fixed expressions and formulaic language, and the by-rote learning of popular collocations. While the use of some of these is commended where it is relevant and can enhance good language usage, it should be noted that overuse cannot compensate for a weak grasp of a range of structures and relevant vocabulary.

Issues with language accuracy take a variety of forms and could be the subject of a much more in-depth study and enquiry. However, for the purposes of this report, the following patterns are particularly noteworthy:

- Spelling errors, where these seemed increasingly to result from sound-to-spelling mismatches rather than from the mistaken recall of how to spell a particular word. Examples included supposedly well-known simple words such as ‘end’ instead of ‘and’, or ‘day’ instead of ‘they’.
- Inconsistency in the use of verb tenses, especially where this involved the use of more complex tense relationships, such as with timeframes for narratives. This suggests that candidates are not always fully in control of the verb tense system in English.
- The misuse of the article (indefinite and definite), including the omission of an article where it would be expected, or not observing the a/an convention before words starting with vowels.
- Lack of control of patterns of agreement, or parallel structures, in longer or more complex structures, particularly where these involved some form of embedded or dependent structures, such as relative clauses, for example. At this level, simple clauses are expected to be accurate, and complex or longer sentences should be attempted and mostly accurate. This affects the cohesiveness of a given sentence and can compromise the overall coherence of ideas.
- The apparent memorising of chunks of language, formulaic language and idiomatic expressions as a substitute for the expected range of vocabulary appropriate to a given context. This would also be considered an example of inaccuracy in relation to vocabulary usage, particularly where such practices affect the overall coherence of the ideas being presented.
With regard to the first essay title, some candidates were familiar with the register required and the style they needed to produce for a covering letter, resulting in well written covering letters. Others had difficulty with the covering letter as a genre. A notable issue included not using the appropriate register, evident if candidates chose to launch into narrations of personal issues and/or family problems in order to convince an employer to give them a job. Helping students to become sensitive to the use of appropriate language for particular contexts would be a useful exercise in this case.

As regards the second essay title, the short story remains a difficult task for all but the particularly strong candidates and/or those candidates with a knack for creativity. In this case, candidates who wrote some of the better essays tackled the genre of a short story either by providing a summarising paragraph of the chosen film followed by a new ending, or instead, interpreting the essay question as a request for a shocking or surprising ending to a well-known film. These attempts were noted for their efforts and rewarded accordingly depending also on the full range of criteria for the language essay, including language accuracy. Some candidates did not write a short story at all and just described the film with a narrative in this way. Short stories should be seen as distinct from descriptive essays, and candidates would benefit from being clear about the differences between the two.

With respect to essay title (c), in general, candidates find the one-word titled essays difficult, as the onus of text organisation clearly falls heavily on them when they are not given an explicit rubric to follow. Again, the candidates with a flair for creativity tend to cope better than others in this genre. It should be noted though, that while the one word title essays are indeed open to interpretation, they still require evidence of a clear concept which needs to be succinctly conveyed and coherently presented. In the case of this particular title, many candidates gave accounts of what networking meant, and included technical descriptions of computer networks, or business networks, and these were all duly acknowledged by the examiners. However, marks may have been lost if candidates failed to present this information within a well-structured format, which should include a general introduction indicating how the essay will be presented, the main body containing the central concepts being considered, and finally, a conclusion which reiterates, reinforces and wraps up the ideas and concepts already presented.

As regards title (d), see the comments on the short story above, to note that candidates are frequently not clear about the distinction between providing a description and presenting a narrative, such as that required for a short story. Naturally, it is acknowledged that descriptions can involve narration, and a narrative can be well described, and the blurring of these conventions is not considered to be a major concern, especially if the candidate still presents a well organised, coherent essay using accurate and appropriate language. However, weaker candidates often resort to worn out themes and images lifted from films or news reports, and again this often results in poor coherence and overly repetitive or rambling accounts of familiar scenes. In this case, the most common themes included soldiers returning home or terrorist attacks and their aftermath. While there is nothing inherently wrong with presenting such accounts, candidates are advised that once again, the most important features of a good essay include evidence of accurate language usage, and the organisation of an essay to form a convincingly lucid idea. It is sometimes evident that candidates have not sufficiently thought their essay planning through before starting their writing in this genre, and this often results in a loosely organised or badly organised essay, which, when also accompanied by a limited vocabulary or poor command of an adequate range of structures, can only obtain limited marks.

The more successful candidates in essay title (e) made an effort to tackle the discussion as it was laid out in the rubric by considering the effects of social media on world events; some candidates also successfully extended this argument to hypothetical situations where social media were not available. Both strategies generally presented effective discussions and plausible arguments, and the strongest essays were well supported by fluent and accurate language usage. Some essays went out of point when candidates moved away from the specific focus on news/world events and their dissemination via social media, and instead concentrated on the broader (negative) effects of social media, such as in the case of cyber bullying. These candidates were marked for language usage but could not obtain full marks for relevance or text organisation in relation to the essay title. Once again, candidates are
reminded to take careful note of the rubric. Although some themes and topics may have been tackled in lessons, candidates would benefit more from using their language skills to address the particular angle required, rather than trying to remember chunks of previous essays, as seems sometimes to be the case. In the case of topical themes, it is to be expected that related vocabulary and/or language chunks will have been discussed in class, and this type of language focus is indeed welcome and beneficial to candidates in their drive towards better exam performance. However, this effort can be compromised if candidates end up going hopelessly out of point by forgetting to concentrate on the specific focus required by the rubric.

As regards title (f), some reports were well written and closely followed the expected general format for a report, including an attempt to establish sections and subsections in their text organisation, and an attempt to use appropriate language structures such as the passive voice or the simple past. Other candidates moved away from a report and instead presented more of a discursive and generic essay on Global Warming, and this may well have led to marks being lost. Note that the rubric for a report is sometimes extended in order to provide better guidelines to candidates as to what is expected of them. However, where examples are given regarding possible topics, as in the rubric above, candidates should note that these are not the main theme of the essay title but simply examples of possible topics to tackle in a report. Some candidates went out of point because they picked up on the themes provided in the example and used these as a basis for a discussion on how such issues needed to be tackled. These essays lost marks for going completely out of point.

3.2 Section B – Language, Comprehension

General Comments

In general, candidates were capable of engaging with the text and getting the general gist of it. However, poor performance was noted in those responses requiring the explanation of specific elements within the text. Therefore, marks were lost due to obscure paraphrasing and concepts not explained clearly and succinctly. Frequent negative transfer from Maltese was noted especially with the word ‘disgust’ being used incorrectly (e.g. ‘People disgust recycled water’, ‘We disgust things...’). The majority of candidates fared better in the short-answer questions, and in some cases this managed to compensate for the rather poor summary skills evident in the summary writing task. In order to achieve high marks, candidates need to not only show that they have understood the text but also that they can express their comprehension competently.

Specific answers

a. Overall, candidates were able to explain the terms. However, the part of speech was often ignored with candidates giving nouns as definitions for adverbs and so on. Spelling mistakes in the definition were also frequent. Some terms proved to be trickier. For example, ‘moulded’ was often confused with ‘mouldy’. ‘Circumvent’ also seemed to be problematic to define with many candidates thinking it had to do with completely eliminating disgust rather than overcoming it or avoiding it. Candidates are reminded that providing the meaning or definition of the given word in context is the main objective of this exercise, and this should therefore include keeping to the same part of speech or language category as much as possible.

b. There were very few incorrect answers to this straightforward question which was about the central concept of the passage. However, some candidates explained the outcome of the Omniprocessor without actually explaining what it is, or else repeated the stem, simply stating that it is a “processor”.

c. There were few completely incorrect answers for this question. However, there were many incomplete explanations. Some answers stopped at explaining the problem while other answers gave a definition of a psychologist’s job. A complete response required the two elements to be linked.

d. Candidates lost marks in this question when they did not remain on topic. For example, some candidates focused on explaining the individual experiments and did not actually explain the conclusion the experiments entailed. They failed to show how the two ideas were related which is what the question asked for specifically.

e. This was the question that proved to be the most problematic. A number of candidates did not understand the implication of ‘opposition be damned’ and the majority had no clue to ‘top-down’. Incorrect replies looked at the randomised method of distribution or the benefits of the system without
actually looking at the tactic being used. Candidates remained on the literal level in their attempt to explain ‘top-down’, explaining that this meant ‘from the roof downwards’, ‘from the city centre to all houses’, ‘to all sections, even underground’.

f. Summary writing proved to be the most challenging task, as is often the case. The majority of candidates demonstrated poor summary writing skills, losing marks on content, language structure and coherence. Although the question specifically asked for the reasons behind the quote, many candidates went out of point. Marks were forfeited for the following reasons:
- Focusing on solutions to the problem rather than the reasons behind it
- Explaining the experiments and how the research was conducted
- Long-winded explanations of the technology involved and why it was being promoted
- Summary paragraph lacking structure without a topic sentence or concluding sentence
- Subject-verb confusion
- Referring expressions used incorrectly
- Lack of cohesive devices
- Incoherence

In other words, marks were lost both over errors in language structure and accuracy, as well as in the presentation of content, as required by the rubric. Candidates need to pay attention to the words of the question and summary task and understand exactly what each task requires them to write. Responses, even if brief, need to be planned and to be expressed coherently. More practice in summary writing skills is recommended.

3.3 Section C – Literature

Text A. Graham Greene The Heart of the Matter

Questions like (a) call for a certain depth in the consideration of the themes mentioned. Even though more effort still needs to be put into discussion skills in general, many candidates attempting this question tried their best to tackle it thoroughly. That being said, more emphasis needed to be given to the aspect of religion and forgiveness, as few candidates expanded their answer to discuss Scobie's inability to accept forgiveness, while instead burdening himself with self-imposed guilt. Given that a central notion of the book is that of a broad discussion of forgiveness (in Roman Catholicism), this latter aspect should have been given more focus in an extension of the discussion. Most of the candidates opted for the simplistic interpretation of Scobie feeling guilty for not being there when Catherine dies and guilty of not really loving his wife and cheating on her. Very few explored Scobie's moral dilemma that is eventually aggravated by the fact that he fails to see God as forgiving. Most answers thus also remained at the narrative level.

Many candidates attempted question (b), providing apt character analysis. One could sense that many of the essays were reproduced essays with little to distinguish one essay from the other.

Overall, question (c) was well answered. Many candidates mentioned the salient points in connection with the provided text, namely religion, corruption and gossip.

Some more work needs to be done on structuring a gobbet essay so that candidates are more able to move beyond the mentioned passage to a broader discussion of the gobbet's relevance to the work as a whole. Many gobbet answers did not necessarily follow the accepted convention which is also indicated in the accompanying guidelines, namely, that the answer should focus on the text provided, and then also relate the gobbet to the whole text. Part of a successful gobbet answer will always demonstrate an ability to consider the given extract in detail and in its own right, but also to relate this to the broader context of the whole text. The answer should include a consideration of how the text provided might be significant in the development of characters, themes and/or plots, as appropriate. In fact, gobbet answers were often presented as open ended or generic essays, and this was sometimes highlighted by the late introduction of phrases such as ‘in this passage’ at around the third or fourth paragraph of the answer indicating a late specific focus on the given passage.

Text B. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Purple Hibiscus

Several candidates attempting question (a) failed to realise that the rubric asked for a discussion, rather than analyses of characters. This is clearly indicated in the instruction to "Discuss how marriage is portrayed…". Candidates are encouraged to carefully note that the wording of a question in this manner
is a clear indication to move beyond character analysis, and to present a more in-depth understanding of both the social and political implications related to the question of marriage as it is tackled in the novel. Most candidates failed to see this question as a discussion about the status of women as portrayed in the novel. Fewer candidates still were able to use this question as an opportunity to discuss the social and political networks in which these marriages are situated. A substantial number of candidates further limited their answers if they portrayed marriage in terms of Eugene and Beatrice alone, giving little attention to Ifeoma.

The answers to question (b) included a number of valid points but it was noted that a good number of candidates failed to analyse what the question was asking for. Many reproduced essays on religion, writing chiefly on the differences between Eugene and Papa-Nnuku, failing to realise that the key words in the essay title were ‘Kambili’s reaction’. Therefore, candidates needed to not only discuss the occurrences leading up to this event but also the aftermath of seeing Papa-Nnuku praying for Eugene.

Curiously, questions presenting the opportunity for open or broader discussion are often answered, as in this case, by a narrowed focus on specific incidents, with candidates failing to link the repercussions of such individual instances to the entire text.

Most of the candidates attempting the gobbet answer on Purple Hibiscus answered it well, managing to locate the extract and to draw out the relation to the central themes of the novel. It was felt, however, that more emphasis should have been given to Kambili, not solely in terms of her relationship with Father Amadi, but on her overall journey in the novel and her coming of age. For further general comments regarding the structure of the gobbet question, please also note those given in The Heart of the Matter above.

Text C A Man for All Seasons

Question (a) proved to be the most popular question on A Man for all Seasons. Most candidates attempting this question showed good knowledge of the text and managed to discuss the aspect of conscience in the play fairly well. However, a major shortcoming in the answer was the perception that a character like More has a conscience while a character like Cromwell does not – so ‘good’ was linked to having a conscience and ‘bad’ was linked to not having a conscience. A more measured consideration might have included the possibility that the idea of conscience, in the sense of being true to one’s inner self, can also be applied to a study of Cromwell, as well as of More.

A number of candidates answered question (b). Most were able to give a good analysis of Cromwell’s character supporting their statements with evidence from the play.

A small number of candidates opted for the gobbet. The answers were generally acceptable with candidates identifying the correct context and eliciting valid points about characters and themes.

Text D Ian McEwan Atonement

Question (a) was a very popular choice among candidates and those who managed to explore the interplay between truth and lies in the novel fared well. However, despite the wording in the question, there were in fact many candidates who did limit their answer to Briony, and also limited their answer to the first incidents presented in the earlier parts of the novel.

Some candidates did well when answering question (b). However, it was felt that more emphasis needed to be given to the historical context and the metaphor of atonement. The question called for candidates to explore why McEwan decided to choose the nursing vocation rather than any other vocation, and so a discussion of this was needed. Candidates did not really focus on ‘the significance of the nursing vocation’ for Cecilia and Briony. Very few candidates actually explored what the experience meant for each of the two characters.

Few candidates attempted question (c) and, overall, the attempt was weak. Whilst being able to locate the extract within the novel and being able to relate what is going on in the passage, little was said about the extract’s relation to the later development of the novel and its central themes. See also similar comments for the gobbet answers in The Heart of the Matter.

Chairperson
2015 Examination Panel