

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
THE MATRICULATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION
ADVANCED LEVEL

ENGLISH

MAY 2007

EXAMINERS' REPORT

MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE
EXAMINATIONS BOARD

**AM ENGLISH
MAY 2007 SESSION
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1. Grade Distribution

The distribution of grades for the May 2007 session at Advanced Level in English is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Distribution of Grades – May 2007

Grade	A	B	C	D	E	F	Absent	Total
No. of candidates	7	26	142	131	121	194	55	676
%	1.0	3.9	21.0	19.4	17.9	28.7	8.1	100

Base = All

2. Paper I: Drama, Poetry, Literary Criticism (Poetry)

Drama (Shakespeare's *King Lear* or *Much Ado About Nothing*), Poetry and Literary Criticism (Poetry)

Overall, the level attained this year was acceptable, generally speaking. Questions set for this Paper were direct, straightforward and unambiguous. Yet, it still remains a fact that candidates find technical difficulties in coping with drama and poetry. They lack the imaginative prowess and linguistic competence that would enable them to give an interpretation of the text rather than resolve narrating a story. What is certainly unacceptable is that at this level, quite a number of the candidates do not possess the basic grammatical, syntactic tools that would enable them to express themselves coherently and imaginatively. Language tends to be confused and confusing, muddled and sorely lacking in clarity and simplicity.

The overwhelming majority of the candidates opted to answer Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The rest answered questions on *Much Ado About Nothing*. Of these, a minuscule percentage of the candidates wrote intelligently, without serious grammatical/syntactic mistakes, and attempted to interpret critically. The rest tended to give the story back to the examiner, at best narrating, occasionally describing, and in very rare cases, analyzing.

Candidates show a fondness for re-telling the story or, at best, regurgitating notes. They recount what they believe the story is all about, sometimes running wild in their imaginings with the result that the essay is replete with serious inaccuracies and outright false statements. What is more worrying is that, in some cases the language used borders on the downright incoherent.

Apart from this, misspelling is rampant and is a serious problem. A vast majority of candidates spell Shakespeare (Shakespear), Gloucester (Gloster, Glouchester), and Edmund (Edmond) wrongly. It gives the impression that these candidates have either never looked at the text.

With Poetry, again overwhelmingly, candidates opted to answer questions on Owen rather than Keats.

Once again, the tendency is to write what the poem is all about in terms of a story. The very large majority of the candidates cannot distinguish between theme and story. The result is a

prose rendition of a poetic text. Only some candidates were able to give an in-depth critical account of the poems chosen for analysis. These candidates do not only possess a remarkably good command of the language, but they also possess the right critical knowledge that enables them to pitch their arguments correctly, directly and profoundly. The rest provide a narrative outline that adds up to a dry summary of the 'events' occurring in the poem chosen. Again, there are serious inaccuracies and semantic vagueness in the candidates' understanding of the text.

Persistent spelling, grammatical, syntactic mistakes are to be found in almost every text. For instance, the misspelt words below are used by quite a number of the candidates.

solgers (soldiers), scheam (scheme), unforchinattly (unfortunately), slawter (slaughter), tugeader (together), fealings (feelings), pletun (platoon), refairs (refers), thorsaw (torso), murther (murder) mabe (maybe), jelous (jealous), underneet (underneath), ipokretikal (hypocritical), clotes (clothes), espetielly (especially), impretion (impression), and others.

The use, or rather, misuse and abuse of punctuation should not be taken lightly. The large majority of candidates have no idea what a comma is for. Punctuation is used haphazardly, illogically and inaccurately. Sentence structure tends to be very weak, paragraphing loose, and the essay generally lacks cohesion and framework. Ideas are disconnected and many loose ends are never tied up. Generally, candidates have no idea how to approach a text critically. Arguments, where they exist, are weak, lame and feeble, unsupported by textual reference and when quotes are inserted they tend to be disconnected from what is being said.

This year's Literary Criticism was marked by poor use of English and by the tendency to present formulaic essay structures. Most predominant of all was the tendency to paraphrase the poem, often to the extent of indulging in a line-by-line 'commentary' that states the obvious without contributing anything to an understanding of the text. This form of 'appreciation' was conducive to a mere listing of technical features (e.g. 'In the first line of the second stanza there is a simile.') that inevitably led candidates to miss the macro aspect of the poem, i.e. the subject and theme of the poem. Other features that recurred in this year's 'Mid-winter Waking' included (i) the tendency to read literally, (ii) stock introductions that could fit any critical appreciation essay, and (iii) extensive waffling in the conclusions.

Paper II: Novels – Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; Graham Greene's *Twenty One Stories*; John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*; Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*; literary criticism (prose)

Although Paper II, particularly the section regarding novels, is usually the area where most candidates fare best, this year's candidates displayed a noticeable decline both in their proficiency in language use as well as their knowledge of text and critical know how. The main fault lay in the fact that the majority of candidates relied almost exclusively on their knowledge of text without so much as attempting to address the theme put forth in the question. Very few candidates truly managed to go beyond the storyline and delve deeply into the relevant subject. Furthermore, even fewer candidates succeeded in putting forth their ideas in coherent English.

Even at an Advanced Level, many candidates committed some of the most basic spelling mistakes:

'prostituet' [prostitute] 'somewere' [somewhere] 'carridge' [carriage]
'enthusiasim' [enthusiasm] 'deystroded' [destroyed] 'suspence' [suspense]
'tourchered' [tortured] 'wrench' [ranch] 'happenes' [happens]
'emphacised' [emphasized]

A few candidates butchered words so much that it would have been impossible to understand what they referred to had it not been for the context. Some of these were:

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'handy kept' [handicapped] 'contagoes' [contagious] 'praegnet' [pregnant]
'prejudistinction' [prejudice] 'consolance' [consolation] 'irreacheable' [unreachable]
'interpretate' [interpret]

Errors in syntax were even more common than spelling and diction errors. Here are a few instances:

'Mr Baines was betraying his wife whom he never loved and the young boy'.

'At those days with the Victorians epoch it was very shameful to have a baby born before marriage or let's say out of wedlock'

'No-one likes Blacker or else he likes no-one'.

Some of the sentences produced by candidates were completely incomprehensible:

'Comradeship failed between the chemistry of the workers'.

'In the book *Of Mice and Men* we find lots of situations that brought together gives the image that there exist a little freedom or nothing on the farm they live in'.

'Everything was new for Tess, the Uberville, their lifestyle. See saw the boys, Alec and Angel very attractive.'

'Blacker the town baker was obsessed with the idea of transubstantiation and befriend Popey Martin with an electric train set and threatened him with 'cut-throat razor'.

'He liked Tess a lot but with her childish attitude he felt intrigued to want her more'

'He also gives the wish for freedom'.

Moving on to grammar, a worrying number of candidates exhibited an inability to make proper use of the possessive. Candidates either omitted it completely, or used it erroneously by mixing it up with the plural, or used it where it was not necessary. For instance:

'about hints' from God to a stranger'

Another common mistake made by candidates was when they referred to people as 'which' instead of 'who' and vice versa:

'The character is a child Francis which his parents were his mother and nurse'.

Tenses were often confused by the weaker candidates, to the point that the sentence was incomprehensible:

'By doing this, even some of the boys have question wheather why does T. decides to do all this'.

'Even a doctor was hanged up because he did abortions in the past life of Gideon'.

Language aside, some candidates made some unforgivable mistakes in relation to their knowledge of text. For instance, a substantial number of candidates committed errors in characters' names. They would refer to 'Bains' instead of 'Baines', 'Lenny' instead of 'Lennie', 'Carlie' or 'Curly' instead of 'Curley', 'Crook' instead of 'Crooks', and 'Angle' instead of 'Angel'. Others even mixed up 'Blackie' and 'Blacker' – both protagonists in Graham Greene's *Twenty*

One Stories. Others even made mistakes in the authors' names. The most common were 'Steibeck' instead of 'Steinbeck' and 'Green' instead of 'Greene'.

Some candidates also made mistakes in names of places particularly those featuring in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*:

'Flintcomb-Ass' [Flintcombe-Ash] 'Stonehedge' [Stonehenge]
'Tantridge' [Trantridge] 'Casterbridge' [Marlott]

Candidates who chose to answer questions about *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* relied excessively on summarizing, especially those who answered the question on destiny. In this case, candidates simply narrated the main episodes that led to the downfall of Tess without showing how destiny itself was largely responsible. On the other hand, some candidates put forth some very convincing arguments, not only showing how *character is destiny* but even how destiny can be considered a character in itself.

Relatively fewer candidates answered the question about landscapes and atmosphere in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Still, those who chose to answer this question showed quite good knowledge on the various localities mentioned in the novel and showed how through such landscapes, Hardy managed to exhibit the feelings and thoughts of his main characters. Unfortunately, some candidates omitted *Stonehenge* and *The Chase* which are the most central and significant localities in the whole novel.

Candidates who answered the question on savagery in *Twenty One Stories* tended to do well when discussing *The Destructors*, but failed to bring forth savagery in other stories. Furthermore, those who answered the question on suspense were incapable of discussing the techniques that Greene uses to create suspense in his stories.

Of Mice and Men seems to be a favourite with most of the candidates as those who answered the questions related to this novel did relatively well. They exhibited good knowledge of text and most were able to go beyond the set text to address the question. Though some of the candidates who answered the question on comradeship tended to concentrate exclusively on Lennie and George, others managed to discuss the theme even in relation to the secondary characters.

Also, those who answered the question on freedom wrote about Lennie and George's dream of owning their own ranch, Crooks' dream of being tolerated, and Curley's wife's dream of becoming a movie star. Unfortunately, some candidates failed to show how, when George killed Lennie, the former renounced all chances of freedom as the dream of owning their own ranch was no longer possible.

Very few candidates answered questions on Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, those who answered the question on oppression fared better than those who answered the one on names and naming.

This year one could also notice a decline in critical know how. Apart from the mentioning of Robert Burns' poem *To a Mouse* in relation to *Of Mice and Men*, only a handful of candidates drew comparisons. Whereas last year a good number of candidates compared *Of Mice and Men* to *Grapes of Wrath*, *A Handmaid's Tale* to Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*, and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* to *Jude the Obscure*, such comparisons were very limited this year. A.C. Marshall's coining of the term *Greeneland* was mentioned quite often, particularly by those who answered the question on savagery, but other than that, very few critics were included in the discussion.

Ending on a positive note, those who fared well in their novel essays manifested a sound knowledge of text which they were able to use to answer the question. They also exhibited a substantially good level of English and flow of argument. Unfortunately, those who managed to obtain this crucial balance were very few.

The section on Literary Criticism (prose) required the candidates to read an extract from a text by Lawrence Durrell and to write a critical commentary about it by paying heed to theme, imagery and features of style. Yet it was immediately apparent that most candidates failed to comment on these aspects and resorted to paraphrasing, at times inaccurately, the given passage. Clearly, at Advanced Level, candidates should have learnt to steer clear of such an approach to a literary text. The inability to analyse a text critically by paying attention to issues relating to content, as well as form, coupled with a very poor command of the English language inevitably led to a substantial amount of essays that were below average. It is most worrying to observe that candidates who are opting to study English at Advanced Level still have considerable difficulty expressing themselves in the language. The blatant disregard of syntactical and grammatical rules, as well as an inability to spell and make good use of punctuation marks, serves to further hinder their ability to write a good enough commentary on the given text.

One must also draw attention to the fact that some candidates neglected to dedicate sufficient time for the planning of the essay. As a result, many essays lacked an adequate structure and came across as incoherent and disjointed. Rather than bringing together certain motifs and stylistic features that are repeated in the extract, candidates opted for a chronological treatment of the text. Moreover, it is evident that some candidates have no idea what should be written in an introduction and a conclusion. Very often candidates simply start their essay by commenting briefly about the first few sentences in the given extract and finish off by referring to the last sentence. More disappointing was the fact that a substantial number of candidates failed to make use of critical terms in what was supposedly a 'critical' commentary. Even some of the more insightful candidates fell short of making due reference to the narrator, to diction, to the use of similes, to the effectiveness of the use of personification and to the fluctuation in tone. Indeed, one does not expect candidates to fail to make the distinction between the author and the narrator, or, perhaps even more disconcerting, between the author and the main character of the text at this level.

On a more positive note, it was clear that a number of candidates have mastered the ability to write a good analytical commentary by quoting relevantly and referring closely to the text. Most commendable is undoubtedly the ability of a relatively small number of candidates who were able to bring to bear the relationship between the thematic concerns at play and the use of imagery and features of style. For instance, a few candidates made the insight that the personification of England goes hand-in-hand with the protagonist's infatuation with the country and that England is portrayed as his lover. Such perceptive reading reveals that some candidates are clearly well-prepared for this examination and that the task of writing a critical response to a short extract from a literary text is clearly not beyond the ability of those who are ready to put in the necessary effort.

4. Paper III – Essay; Comprehension; Linguistics: *Malta: A Linguistic Landscape* by L. Sciriha & M. Vassallo; *English as a Global Language* by D. Crystal

Stating that this year's Matsec 'A' Level English examination scripts have yielded a number of rather basic errors is putting the matter mildly. Where the Language Paper 3 is concerned, these appear at an alarmingly frequent rate, especially in the case of the Language Essay.

Among the language mishaps encountered are the literal translation of entire sentences from Maltese to English, evident in such offerings as 'A problem that nothing is done to put a stop to it', and 'Not in world's disasters only we feel helpless but even on things that happen to us and that can happen to our relatives.' The spilling over from one language into another is extremely clear, to the point where the sentences above could easily be translated word for word from English

back into Maltese. The interference of Maltese in the candidates' writing skills in English and its negative impact on the syntax of the latter is patently obvious.

The next aspect of the candidates' writing that necessitates highlighting is the general lack of accuracy in the use of idiom and turn of phrase. The confusion of 'on the contrary' with 'on the other hand' could be viewed in a multitude of cases, as could such 'inventions' as 'to feel dozed off', to be 'terminally influenced by some kind of health condition', and the fact that 'money that is spend (sic) is wasted down the drain'. A combination of the two occurrences can be witnessed in the following phrase: 'Parents should teach their children how to drink', where the semantics is clouded due to the student's inability to place the remark appropriately within the set context; in this case, that of a discursive essay dealing with the topic of drinking and driving.

Grammatical errors abound within this session's language scripts, particularly those in terms of verb tenses or, indeed, the conjugation of verbs. An unforgettable example lies in the opening line of one of the essays referred to: 'Do you know Roger? Who don't?' In a similar example, a student chooses the following sentence as the introduction to the language essay: 'I use to believe that...', indicating not only a lack of cognizance of the verb formation, but also unfamiliarity with a very common expression/ turn of phrase. Verb tenses such as the present perfect are eschewed in favour of the ubiquitous simple past, even when the latter does not appropriately convey the time frame required by a certain sentence or action. Prepositions can also be observed to have become another casualty of careless writing skills, evidenced in 'Such circumstances are not being taken care from the higher authorities' and 'drinking is illegal to children'.

At times, spelling blunders border on the ridiculous, considering the level that the candidates are expected to have reached – cases in point are 'adoloscents', even 'adoloscence' where the actual persons are being referred to; also, 'deffinatly'.

Of course, it must also be pointed out that the above occurrences do not apply to the examination scripts in their entirety; there are certainly a number of essays that are commendable in their attempt to debate the set topics in a mature and also stylish manner. Such answers tend to be noteworthy for their somewhat fluid style, and the ability to make a point succinctly, as in 'Alternative medicine has also incorporated alternative forms of eating, such as vegetarianism and veganism, placing much attention on the nutritional aspect of our diets.', as well as the description of compulsive buying as a situation where the victims 'take to the high street and drown their sorrows in an avalanche of receipts, endless treks through different outlets and the intoxicating smell of the new and the novel.'

The fact that samples such as the above are few and far between reveals a great deal about the level that today's English language writing skills have descended to.

The set comprehension focussed on graffiti in New York City.

Once again, candidates performed rather well in this section. Most marks were lost in the fourth question, in which candidates were asked to give the meaning of the underlined words in the text.

Candidates lost marks in the question which asked candidates to summarise the reasons why people resorted to graffiti because the main reasons were not identified correctly.

The candidates who performed poorly in this section, were those who either left whole questions out entirely, or who failed to understand the set passage.

The Linguistics essay titles were:

'We can only speculate about how media developments must have influenced the growth of world English.' Discuss with reference to Crystal's *English as a Global Language*.

'Although Maltese is the native language of the overwhelming majority of the Maltese, quite a number of other languages are also known.' Discuss with reference to Malta – A linguistic landscape.

'The degree of proficiency in foreign languages in Malta is not even' Discuss with reference to Malta – A linguistic landscape.

These questions were evidently very clearly set: the first question required candidates to comment on the effects that media development had upon the growth of world English. This question demanded that candidates should have a good knowledge of the contents of the fourth chapter of David Crystal's book.

As is amply evident even from a first reading of the chapter in question, the points that should have been mentioned and that were indeed rewarded, were the references to the media which included the press, advertising, broadcasting, the cinema and popular music. One simply had to think of what constitutes the world of media and write an essay which dealt, in some detail, with each of these sections. Of course, the candidates who showed that they were indeed familiar with the text, went on to cite several examples in order to substantiate their answers. These candidates showed that their knowledge of text was quite vast and as a consequence, they were able to give an interesting rendition of this essay title.

The candidates who failed to obtain at least a pass mark in this section, were those who never made a single reference to the text or the author and who failed to show the culmination of two years of working and familiarising themselves with the text. Sadly, these candidates went on and on about their personal experience with the language and never got close to answering the question, and this showed that they had no idea what the contents of chapter 4 were.

The second question, *'Although Maltese is the native language of the overwhelming majority of the Maltese, quite a number of other languages are also known.'* Discuss with reference to Malta – A linguistic landscape.

This question required candidates to mention the fourteen languages that are known on the Maltese islands. Again, it is a pity that some candidates performed badly in this section. They simply showed that they had no idea what the contents of the chapter were. Indeed on page 16 of the text, there is a subtitle to the chapter, 'Other Languages Known by the Maltese'- a clear enough indication as to what was expected in this question.

The candidates who did very well in this question, were those who showed that they were aware of the fact that a number of languages are known in Malta, and they went on to cite these languages, even quoting the correct percentage of the population who are able to speak these languages. These candidates once again actively engaged with the questions, showing that they were well aware of the contents of the material which had been their set text throughout the entire two year course.

Very few candidates were able to mention all the fourteen languages and some simply mentioned the three or four main languages known in Malta, without ever citing or commenting on any percentages whatsoever.

With regard to the third question set: *'The degree of proficiency in foreign languages in Malta is not even'* Discuss with reference to Malta – A linguistic landscape, candidates could have easily obtained a good mark simply by showing awareness of the fact that although proficiency in the first foreign language (English) is quite high, the same proficiency cannot be equated with the rest of the foreign languages and in this case, languages such as French, Italian and German should have been mentioned and the related percentages should have been cited and quoted. This would have proven that there is evidence of knowledge of text.

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The examiners consider it important to underline the fact that candidates need to give more attention to the contents of the two set texts and not be prepared for one text alone. Both texts should be known well, particularly in the light of the fact that it is not one entire book that needs to be studied, but merely a few chapters from each of the books – and therefore candidates have to show that they are both knowledgeable of the content and are able to engage with the question, in an effort to ensure that what is being written, is what is required by the chosen question.

Conclusion

Although one expects to find essays of poor quality in any exam session, at Advanced level candidates are expected to have learnt how to avoid certain basic mistakes and how to express themselves in a clear and comprehensible manner.

Chairperson
Board of Examiners

July 2007