

**UNIVERSITY OF MALTA**  
**THE MATRICULATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION**  
**INTERMEDIATE LEVEL**

**ENGLISH**

**MAY 2009**

**EXAMINERS' REPORT**

**MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE**  
**EXAMINATIONS BOARD**

**IM ENGLISH  
MAY 2009 SESSION  
EXAMINERS' REPORT**

The following are the figures for May 2009. The trend observed in the last five years for the numbers of students taking Intermediate to increase has continued, with a further increase of 148 over last year's 1431 candidates.

<b>Grade</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Abs</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Number</b>	132	198	384	338	206	296	25	1579
<b>% of Total</b>	8.4	12.5	24.3	21.4	13.0	18.7	1.6	100

<b>Grade</b>	<b>No. of Candidates</b>	<b>% of Candidates</b>
<b>A - C</b>	<b>714</b>	<b>45.2</b>
<b>A - E</b>	<b>1258</b>	<b>79.7</b>
<b>FAIL</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>18.7</b>

Overall this was an improved performance, possibly suggesting that students and teachers have absorbed the changes in the syllabus, which is that for 2008-2010. Students had to take an Oral (10 marks), and in the Written, they had to answer three questions allotted 30 marks each: a general essay, a comprehension and summary and one literature question.

**ORAL**

There are indications that the Oral is not testing the students' competence in spoken English completely effectively. In this regard, the work already started this year by the current syllabus panel is very promising, with discussions over the possible ways in which the orals could be held already taking place.

## LANGUAGE

The examiners observed a number of typical errors. Some of these are considered as basic errors that are completely unacceptable at Intermediate level.

**Verbs** - common mistakes included errors in **verb-subject agreement**, such as “the doctor do not waste time,” and **tense agreement** “He come yesterday.”

**Article and number agreement:** “a wonderful things.”

**Possessives being mistaken for plurals** and vice versa -“way’s” and “issue’s” “Georges,” “the rabbits mouth”

**Syntactic structures** which involve the inversion of an auxiliary verb for a question when in reality the candidate means to make a statement and vice-versa: “how could we cure it” instead of “how we could cure it” or “how private will be these tests?” instead of “how private will these tests be?”

**Comparative and superlative forms of adjectives** – these were confused: “the most issues that should be handled”

**Prepositions** “in relation with” rather “in relation to,” “in answer for” instead of “in answer to,” “agree of” instead of “agree with,” and many others.

**Vocabulary and idiom:** “analysation” for “analysis”, “patience” for “patients”, “premonish” for “fortell”, “expensivity” for “cost”, “All is done as prevention is better than cure”, “Autoimunity causes cynical disease”, “to take cleaver steps” and “embanking on”.

## Spelling

- Spelling errors very often occurred namely as a result of insufficient grammatical knowledge (such as the lack of exposure/familiarity to and knowledge of verbs/phrasal verbs): ‘It was their ambissious dream and they wanted to be carefull about it because if someone herd about it, jeoulosy would take place.’ ‘Thus they both need this dream to come true to let them rest and break them of the insecure...’, ‘He has a barrier brought about by his skin colour,’ ‘to work out their loneliness in the brothel,’ ‘The mistake he did,’ ‘he could leave such an easy life without Lennie around,’ ‘We can see this throw out the novel,’ ‘while the others stood up in power,’ ‘Steinbeck had peppered us throughout the story with hints of what is going to happen at the end.’

Errors included the usual homophonic mistakes: (were/where, ours/hours, weather/whether, their/there, day/they, decease/disease, no/know, it’s/its etc. Numerous cases of : “aspect” for “expect”, “arouse” for “arise” “safe” for “save”, “mayed” for “made” “Intensially” – “unintensially” “cholecteral” for “cholesterol” “antigents” for “antigens” “curiculume” for “curriculum”, “handikapt” for “handicapped,” “continuessly” for “continuously,” and “angree” for “angry.”

“Eventhough” “Infact” “eachother” “ infront” - these were spelled as one word rather than two.

**Neglect of articles** both at the beginning of sentences and in the middle of sentences.

**Connectors** Candidates showed a lack of knowledge of how to use cohesive devices (linking words). Too many students do not know words such as “moreover,” “furthermore,” “subsequently,” “ additionally,” and fail to use them correctly. Many candidates use connectors such as “but,” “however,” “although” etc. but do so in inappropriate contexts, for example, at the beginning of sentences when no contrast is outlined further on throughout the sentence. Conjunctions (e.g. but, because, and) are also incorrectly used, generally placed at the beginning of the sentence.

**Relative clauses** (e.g. which, who, that) – used incorrectly

**Punctuation** The use of punctuation marks (e.g. the use of commas/semi-colons) was consistently lacking and a general indifference was expressed towards the clear distribution of information within a sentence. Incorrect, at times exaggerated, use of ellipsis and exclamation marks. Exclamatory sentences were frequently structurally meaningless; subsequently rendering the use of the exclamation mark pointless. Other punctuation errors consisted of quotes from the literature texts without any open or closed inverted commas.

**Lack of distinction between verbs and adjectives** ending in –ed and –ing like “interested” and “interesting.”

In both sections of the examination, essays were often deficient in:

- Planning (logical sequencing of points/arguments)
- sentence construction
- Paragraphing

Some essays were marred by the inappropriate use of slang words eg. guys, kids.

The influence of the Maltese language on syntax was widely felt. A substantial number of essays contained heavy instances of literal translation from Maltese to English. Some words were literally picked from the Maltese language and altered slightly in an attempt to substitute an unknown English equivalent.

e.g. ‘economy was at the bottom’, ‘it does not stay long’, ‘consequences,’ ‘Lennie did not grow from his mind,’ ‘George ends up in his own words,’ ‘He can stay playing,’ ‘He didn’t calculate her,’ ‘evitate Lennie getting into trouble,’ ‘remained with nothing.’

The examiners note that attempts seem to have been made by some educators to impart a set of English expressions to the students. This is largely beneficial. However, it is emphasized that this method needs to continue to work in conjunction with encouraging students to read more since the same limited set of expressions kept resurfacing in consecutive essays. As educators are very well aware, reading will also continue to open up students’ minds to a world of ideas as these were sometimes lacking in the work presented.

### **Language Essay - General Comments**

Despite the fact that several titles invited and expected different forms of essays such as a discussion, a statement for the police, an article for a newspaper, an email for a specified purpose; an overwhelming majority of candidates opted to choose a title that permitted their writing a text that was clearly and essentially narrative. Unfortunately, too many narratives failed to pitch as the kind of narrative one would expect at this level. Often stories barely went beyond being a collated number of events just hanging together by chronology (and not necessarily logic) giving the feeling that candidates could be under the false impression that they may continue to milk the kind of narratives that seem fossilized somewhere in their early Secondary. This is not desirable. More particular observations about the candidates’ writing of narrative are found in the specific comments later on. The point to make here is that, while one may, to a certain extent, agree that writing the quality of narrative expected in an Intermediate examination may not be as immediately taxing as writing argument, candidates cannot abuse the creativity permitted in narrative believing that anything goes.

As expected, being a national examination, the candidates’ efforts in the language essay provided ample examples of a whole range of writing abilities of this cohort. Towards the top end of the cline, one finds a healthy number of essays that convey a sense of ‘wholeness’ (command of the language, coherence and

cohesion, logic of language, style, wit, discipline, adherence to convention, etc.) Unfortunately and very sadly (even for reasons beyond this Intermediate examination), at the other end of the cline, one finds candidates whose writing efforts are basically a series of 'sentences' that are incorrect or defective for some reason or other and whose efforts manifest language shortcomings that would be penalized even at Primary level. For the purpose of this report, there is very little that one can add to the comments concerning these extremes of performances by the candidates in the language essay. There are, however, a couple of general observations that may/should be helpful to others. Candidates, particularly those who have little problem expressing themselves in English, need to constantly remember that they are writing for examination purposes, which means they need to be careful about the degree of colloquialism/informality in their writing as what is accepted in speech is not necessarily correct in writing. (For example, '*She came in showing off her new dress. Like we didn't know it.*') Not surprisingly, this tendency to drift into a 'risky' writing style becomes more evident in narrative texts written in the first person, concerned with contexts where the 'narrator' is supposedly engaging with friends. Another even more important observation has to be that, while there is no doubt that candidates do manifest shortcomings in discrete grammatical items and expression; reading hundreds of essays suggests that candidates' efforts are more obviously undermined by weaknesses in ideas, logic, coherence and rhetorical structure as responses are often characterized by gaps in the writing, non-sequiturs and parts of text that carry no specific function.

**Specific Comments on the various essays:**

- a) **Write a story ending with the words: 'He who laughs last, laughs loudest.'**
- f) **An Unforgettable Experience**

These two titles proved to be the most popular choices. The titles obviously permitted endless possibilities and the candidates' responses to the titles demonstrated certain similarities that justify commenting upon both together.

Unlike the statement reporting a theft (*Option b*) and the email describing what happened to a friend (*Option e*), these two titles allowed a rather broad leeway for candidates to be creative in their narrative. Generally speaking, one feels that candidates did not positively profit from the freedom of story-telling possible with these titles. Too many responses were closer to simply being a series of events without a proper sense of leading to the main event or particular emphasis on the main event itself. For example, many wrote about a holiday abroad or seeing their favourite football team in action as their unforgettable experience. There is, of course, nothing wrong in this; however, too many of these efforts rarely went beyond the idea of a holiday brochure that simply lists the itinerary or, in the case of the football stories, the mention of important footballers, particular football grounds and souvenirs. Only rarely did candidates convey the real sense of passion that one would expect. The stories ending with 'He who laughs last, laughs loudest.' were generally narratives concerning experiences of inadequacy, bullying or inferiority complex during childhood. Again one cannot complain about such decisions taken by the candidates and none were in any way penalized for such a choice, however, one does feel that many conveniently opted for the stereotypical 'ugly duckling' story where the victim rises to stardom and yet, in spite of today's media, is not recognized by those who had taunted her/him until s/he reveals his identity in some reunion. Whereas some essays showed a steady and gradual development leading to an appropriate application of this well-known proverb as a conclusion to their story, others created a feeble development and link between the episodes in the narrative and the last words.

Many of the responses to these two titles underscore the examiners' feeling that some candidates may have the mistaken impression that writing narrative is easy, they can get away with anything they feel like throwing into the story and they may actually believe they are good at it.

Another point to make about certain decisions taken by candidates in the writing of these two narratives concerns the degree of overloading, complexity of plot and exaggeration woven into the stories. There is nothing specifically wrong with this, but, one does get the idea that too many candidates believe that the quality of their narratives is determined by the level of 'sensationalism'. Obviously, this is more typical of stories that speak of remote, untypical experiences such as a plane crash in a tropical jungle or in mid

ocean. While truth may be stranger than fiction certain things simply cannot happen (one cannot, for example, crawl for hundreds of metres along the bottom if one runs out of air while scuba diving) and candidates need to learn how far they can stretch their knowledge into the realm of fiction without producing a text that feels like a collection of impossibilities and exaggerations. Just as the writer of the argumentative essay carries the responsibility of the arguments in her/his text, the narrative writer needs to understand her/his onus in the creation of the events of the plot.

- b) You were shopping and your bag was stolen. Write a full statement giving details of the theft for the police.**
- e) A friend from abroad who was staying with you was injured in an accident ... a full email in which you describe what happened and the medical attention that your friend is receiving.**

Generally speaking the responses to these titles were positive because many of the candidates demonstrated an understanding of the function of the text and presented information in a logical, 'non-rushed', meticulous manner often in a way/style/language that reflected sensitivity to the context had these been 'real life situations'. For example, candidates need to be commended on their demonstration of awareness to include in the email their sense of responsibility towards their friend; the need to repeatedly reassure their friends' parents, the sense of caution in proclaiming themselves about their friend's condition and their sincere readiness to be at the parents' service. This writing task was generally handled quite well although it should be noted that examiners turned a blind eye to the style of the e-mail addresses used so as not to penalise students who might not be fully acquainted with current technology.

In contrast with the degree of emotion found in the emails, the police statement were written factually and demonstrated a concern with an effort to recall details that may help the police. The feeling is that while the statement (b) and the emails (e) expected a text that demanded certain characteristics, most of the candidates were up to the task and did well. With some candidates, however, there seemed to be a difficulty in the comprehension of what was to be included and who was to be addressed (particularly towards the end of the essay). For this reason a number of essays falling under this category were somewhat weak both in language and ideas.

- c) 'The immunization of infants against diseases such as measles and chicken pox should be obligatory.' Discuss.**
- d) The music or dancing class you have attended for several years has been asked to submit an article for the newspaper about the class and the main activities organized. Write the article.**

The general feeling is that most of the candidates attempting these two titles did so because they could rely on background experience. The explanation of how the body immunization system works or may be helped or hindered, the various stages of promotion in dance or music training, the inclusion of the correct terminology such as pathogens, pirouette, harmonization or jamming are all indicators of this. This was, of course, an advantage to the writers and the result was that most of the essays felt correct. The background experience probably also contributed to the organization of these essays, in the sense that those writing about immunization followed the logical sequence of first explaining what immunization is; how it improves naturally and how it may be helped and then went into the argument of whether immunization should be obligatory or not. In a similar way, those writing about their experience in music/dance classes tended to follow the logical sequence of their joining the class, their growing experience with the class and then spoke about the main activities organized by the dance/music school/class they attend. Again while the essays on immunization were generally facts and opinion the music/dance texts were pleasantly well pitched with emotion and passion.

Some of the essays on whether immunization of infants against diseases like measles and chicken pox should be obligatory were very strong, with some candidates providing a sound insight as to what immunization involves as well as to perceived advantages and disadvantages leading to their arguments for or against obligatory immunization. As with such essays, some of the difficulties lay in an imbalance

between the three necessary components, that is, between the description of what immunization entails, the arguments in favour of it and the arguments counteracting it.

### Comprehension

It is clear that self-expression is difficult for a large number of candidates especially when they are challenged by the analytical thought processes involved in answering a comprehension and writing an effective summary. One often feels that even though students do understand the text and the questions, they are often unable to provide a clear, coherent answer. At times, candidates often write 'loose' sentences that do not make sense on their own e.g. "Like for example, being discriminated at work because the employer obtained your medical information."

A more detailed discussion of individual questions follows:

#### a. i) Give the meaning of the underlined words and phrases: (6marks)

**Taken aback (paragraph 1)** – the majority of students gave a correct interpretation of this phrase. Some students, however, seemed to assume that it referred to Anne's (the patient mentioned as an example at the beginning of the text) state of health, coming up with such misinterpretations as "starten to worsten"; "like your medical health has gone for a stroll backwards" and "she was taken suddenly".

**Plausible (paragraph 4)** – this word was often left out entirely and was somehow confused with "laudable" several times.

**Array (paragraph 4)** – over-all, this was understood to be a selection of sorts and was thus marked as correct in the larger part of the scripts.

**Enticing (paragraph 5)** – this was occasionally interpreted as "misleading" and sometimes as "dangerous" or "nasty" rather than attractive.

**Cumbersome (paragraph 5)** – in many cases candidates gave "time consuming" as an answer to this rather than "difficult" or "heavy and awkward".

**Converse (paragraph 6)** – the majority of students interpreted this correctly as "opposite" or "vice versa" although some left it out.

#### a ii) (2 marks)

**What part of speech is the word physical in paragraph 4 of the above passage?**

The great majority did not know the meaning of 'part of speech.' Typical answers included "metaphor," "simile," "ellipsis" and other literary terms.

Even though other candidates did know what the task entailed, there was an apparent confusion between verb, noun, adjective, adverb and pronoun. Many students explained 'physically' as adjective and 'physical' as verb.

Others gave long and convoluted explanations, which were clearly far off the mark:

"A physical test, coming from physics."

"It is a part of speech of the body. It is referring to a physical check up."

"Physical in this passage means that the patient is taking therapy to start his joints of the body to work again, for example Anne needs physical therapy to get her right foot back with her left one."

**a. ii) Write a sentence illustrating the use of the word physical as a different part of speech. Identify this part of speech.**

Here some of the sentences were either grammatically incorrect while still using “physical” as an adjective. A good number wrote an expository sentence correctly and some others transformed “physical” into an adverb and wrote perfectly correct sentences using the word “physically” which they correctly labelled as an adverb, just as they had correctly identified “physical” as a noun in the first part of the question.

**b. What is the “profound insight” referred to in paragraph 2 of the passage above? (4marks)**

This question required in-depth analysis of the paragraph and of the phrase itself. Candidates were expected to identify the realization of the significance of the discovery of the presence of autoantibodies in an individual's system months and years before autoimmunity actually sets in, and the emerging understanding that this discovery can be used to our advantage in screening and prevention. Candidates with unusual insight also understood the implications such an insight carried in terms of what it tells us about the human body – that we are imperfect, vulnerable to our own body's self-destruction and ultimately, mortal. Such depth of thought was sadly missing in most cases. In this question, the incorrect conjugation of the verb ‘to refer’ was a recurring fault. Typically, answers started ‘Profound Insight is referred to ...’

**c. Briefly describe the “plausible scenario” outlined in paragraph 4 of the above passage. (4 marks)**

This question simply required the candidates to identify the excerpt from the text which relates to the “plausible scenario” and paraphrase it. Sadly, grammatical errors, lack of punctuation and spelling mistakes were very much in evidence here; as were extremely short and barely coherent answers. Some examples:

“Unlike *present* check-ups in the *future* except for the comon test carried out on blood samples, for example cholesterol blood sugar levels etc the doctor will check for autoantigens.”

“The plausible scenario consists of filling bottle samples with blood. Obviously this is done by the doctor.”

“The doctor do not waste time and take the tube himself but send it quickly.”

Others reproduced almost word for word the relevant extract from the text and although the “plausible scenario” was described, marks were deducted for verbatim lifting of the text.

**d. What do you think the author's position on the possible use of predictive autoantibodies is? (4 marks)**

This question required the students to assess the authorial tone and describe how it affected them accurately enough to give a justifiable answer. As long as the final answer was supported by enough relevant textual references, different modulations of tone were acceptable. Very few showed enough analytical skills to create a convincing answer, while some even gave an extremely short answer stating whether his attitude is positive or negative, with no reference to the text at all to justify their answer.

**e. In not more than 100 words write a summary to show what issues still need to be resolved before it becomes possible for predictive autoantibodies to start being used regularly in the clinic. (10 marks)**

The greater majority of candidates kept to the word limit stipulated in the instructions. However, there were a handful of grossly misguided exceptions where candidates wrote double and in one case almost three times as much as the limit. There were also a number whose summaries were too short, below 60 words. Again what was evident in the summary was not only an unclear identification of the main points required but also a serious lack of paraphrasing and summary skills which resulted in unbalanced sections, with one point taking up most of the summary and the rest crammed into the final sentence. Direct copying from the text was also rampant. Ungrammatical, unidiomatic English was again a major problem, with such descriptions as:

“Ethically, it may be wrong to endure a life, so should be discussed.”

“Despite predictive testing, how sense it makes without no preventing or ameliorating treatment.”

“...such diseases cannot be prevented unless no prevention for them is available.” “...the doctors could undergo other health diagnosis.”

“...some virus known as autoantibodies...”

## LITERATURE

A relatively small number of students were well-prepared for the examination, had clearly read the texts and had developed a literary sense that enabled them to write about the texts critically. The great majority of candidates showed an average understanding of the texts set and were quite capable of commenting about characters and general themes. Detailed factual knowledge of the text was not often shown and any reference to critics and/or critical works was seldom made. It must be noted that poor writing skills, especially grammar, sentence construction and expression often resulted in weak answers.

The weaker points included:

- Simplified sentence structures (e.g. ‘George is smart Lennie is not.’/ ‘In the novel he had a dog.’) and fear of using the possessive. (e.g. ‘...the front garden of Eugene...’ as opposed to Eugene’s front garden).
- Critical knowledge/perspective and the ability to comment from a literary standpoint were below expected standard. This was often accompanied by an immature style of literary argumentation/ expression of opinion. Some examples:

‘In my opinion from all the male characters in this novel, I liked Candy most because he is old and I think the reader feels sorry for him. The rest of the characters are all vulnerable.’

‘Through him, Steinbeck is telling us that if we believe in the American dream, we are retarded, whits or “dum-dums.”’

‘George asked Slim if he could give a puppy to Lennie because he had something for soft and small creatures.’

‘Before George came, the passage that there is happened.’ (Reference to Section B, question 1c)

‘He has just killed Curley’s wife when she asked him to touch her soft hair.’

- Unclear meaning owing to limited levels of self-expression, not necessarily related to general knowledge of text/background knowledge:

‘They try to overcome them ( i.e. vulnerability) mostly by the American dream, which just like it says, is just a dream and will come true.’

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'They both started to refrain their dream, but George knew it was the last time because he eventually shot Lennie dead.'

'Lennie although he had his friend George he was vulnerable because he strong and he did not realise.'

'Lennie himself might be regarded as an uplifting to George...'

'He did not believe in God and therefore he had no moral beliefs.'

'She could easily get him hanged by a tree.'

'How childish Lennie was because he was totally independent on George, even how he talks with Aunt Clara.'

- Many answers showed the inability to include quotes and embed them within writing. Most candidates added quotes just because they were memorized and for the sake of including them. This results in quotes that 'stand alone' with no clear connection to the previous or following point. Candidates lack the skill of quoting in order to reinforce or further explicate a point being made.-
- Candidates frequently fail to understand what the question requires. This was mostly evident in question B1b, where candidates mentioned general points about the dream but did not focus on the second part of the question.
- Another point worth mentioning is that (similar to what was pointed out last year) candidates lacked the necessary skills/knowledge of text required to answer a gobbet type question. Candidates generally focused somewhat exclusively on main character mentioned in the passage provided and did not discuss the deeper significance of the passage in relation to plot. This highlights the fact that most candidates lack the ability to structure and present arguments of their own.
- Moreover, candidates at times simply rely on basic information about the text. For example in question B1a most candidates just focused on the personal vulnerabilities of the weak characters, glossing over the fact that the environment, time and wider context (Great Depression, Dust Bowl, predicament of migrant ranch worker, prejudice) presented in the novel also contribute to the characters' vulnerability. Unfortunately, most essays presented rather superficial evaluations.
- *Of Mice and Men* was the most popular choice. Essays focusing on *Purple Hibiscus* and *A Man for all Seasons* generally yielded stronger answers. The better answers did not only show deep understanding of the novel/play but commented on symbols, images, literary devices (e.g. foreshadowing) and discussed the more complex themes, showing an ability to interpret salient points within the literary work.

Chairperson  
Board of Examiners  
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