

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
THE MATRICULATION EXAMINATION

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

ENGLISH

MAY 2013

EXAMINERS' REPORT

MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE
EXAMINATIONS BOARD

**IM ENGLISH
MAY 2013 SESSION
EXAMINERS' REPORT**

OVERVIEW

The following examiners' report presents details of candidates' performance in this session.

In general, and similar to previous examination sessions, overall performance indicated that candidates can demonstrate that they have sufficient, and sometimes superior, control of the English language. It is also possible to reiterate last year's examiners' report by noting that knowledge of both simple and complex grammar structures is important, but it is only one part of the skill of being able to use a language effectively. The ability to use a good range of vocabulary, to synthesise and organise ideas into a coherent structure and attend closely to the rubric presented in each question answered, are all equally important skills for the successful completion of this exam.

MAY 2013 RESULTS		
Grade	No. of Candidates	% of Candidates
A	138	8.9
B	229	14.8
C	405	26.2
D	219	14.2
E	255	16.5
F	282	18.2
Abs	19	1.2
Total	1547	100

Grade	No. of Candidates	% of Candidates
A-C	772	49.9
A-E	1246	80.5
F	282	18.2

DISTRIBUTION OF MARKS

The figures above indicate a good performance by the majority of candidates, and the following sections give a detailed account of examiners' findings and feedback.

ORAL PAPER

Candidates were on the whole well prepared for their Oral Paper, and were generally familiar with the format of the exam. Those candidates presenting a good command of a range of the main language systems including clear diction, wide-ranging vocabulary and a balance of simple and complex structures, coped well with their two tasks. Some candidates' hesitation and apparent inability to speak at length suggest that they may not have had the opportunity to practise speaking on a regular basis over the long term. Speaking and listening, like all other aspects of language use, require a relevant context for study, together with plenty of opportunity for practice.

SECTION A – LANGUAGE

ESSAY

General Comments

It is necessary to reiterate previous examiners' reports here, to say that while a number of candidates had the ability to shine in this section, thanks to their firm command of both basic and more complex structures and vocabulary, many more candidates struggled much more to convey their thoughts and ideas in relation to the questions put to them. Evidence of learning language through memorised chunks is increasingly obvious and it must be emphasised that this strategy will not adequately compensate for wider and closer exposure to the language. In short, candidates are to be encouraged at all costs to appreciate that successful communication in a language depends less on memory work and more on sustained practice in and exposure to all forms of the language in question. Energy devoted to attempting to fit previously learned essays or shorter chunks of language to exam essay titles would be better spent in careful planning and organisation of an answer using any available language structures, even if these are quite simple. A well structured essay, making careful and correct use of perhaps limited language resources, and showing evidence of engaging with a text beyond the superficial level, is more likely to meet the required standards of this exam than the random inclusion of more ambitious, but half remembered and often inappropriately placed idioms, fixed expressions and other language chunks.

Language Usage and Text Organisation

A select number of essays were a pleasure to read, as they combined a strong grasp of a range of structures and of vocabulary, and a clear progression of well organised ideas, in interpreting the chosen title. In general, the written responses to the essay titles of Section A showed that all candidates understood *what* they had to write about and, in most cases, *how* they had to present it. Other weaker essays presented widespread errors in basic grammar and also the ubiquitous spelling issues with *where/were* or *their/there*, together with a severely limited range of vocabulary.

Candidates' attention is drawn to the importance of planning and organisation of essay material. Many of the weaker candidates had serious difficulty keeping to the word count, in many cases writing well below, and sometimes in excess of, the intended word limit, and occasionally also putting down a false word count in an attempt to avoid losing marks. The word count should be used as a guide to help plan an essay within an acceptable timeframe, pitched to the appropriate level, and it should be used accordingly.

Essay planning in general was weak, with just a rather small number of candidates managing to present a clearly structured text, together with evidence of a coherent sense of direction or progression of ideas from a clear introduction through to a well-linked conclusion.

Essay choices

The list of essay titles offered the usual range of text types as set out in the syllabus for this exam, with the most popular among candidates being those that lent themselves to extended descriptions, such as (a) or (f) or discursive writing, such as (d). General comments from the examiners include the recommendation for candidates to attend more carefully to the text type and context presented in each essay title. As in previous years, few candidates answering the report and letter titles (b) and (c) respectively, could present a convincing grasp of the chosen format. This issue is more consistently noted for reports than for letters, overall. Similarly, the more open-ended titles allowing for maximum creativity, such as (a) also proved a challenge for some students who found it difficult to structure their essay coherently enough within the wider parameters offered. Examiners therefore recommend that candidates should be encouraged to be fully conversant with the different text types and contexts that are likely to be presented. At this level of study, candidates must appreciate that successful completion of this exam depends not only on demonstration of basic language skills, but also, on the ability to use that language to demonstrate sensitivity to different language contexts and the ability to organise and structure their language into an effective and appropriate response to the questions at hand.

a) The sea

This title allowed for a wide range of possible responses, and the more successful candidates managed to harness their ideas and focus on presenting a coherent theme. Weaker candidates were unable to structure the essay and were more likely to put down unrelated ideas and thoughts as they occurred to them.

b) You are a member of an environmental group that is planning an event to raise awareness about the environment in Malta. The event might be eligible for governmental funding. Write a proposal report addressed to the Director of Public Projects within the Ministry of Finance, in which you explain your plans, your aims, and how the funds would be used.

As in previous reports, it is noted here that a large number of candidates are unfamiliar with the formal format for presenting a report. Despite the rubric which offered a clear context for writing, a number of

candidates thought that the report was to be prepared to raise funds for the government, rather than request funding, and this obviously skewed the essay.

c) Respond to a letter published in the local newspaper which is suggesting that social media are often considered a distraction from studying and should be restricted to over eighteen year-olds.

The letter format is generally appropriately used by the majority of candidates, although there were still a number of essays which were not presented in letter format. A number of the weaker candidates did not take into consideration the part of the rubric which required a response to the position given. Candidates are to be reminded that the rubric is there to assist in the planning and organisation of writing, and they would therefore do well to pay close attention to its requirements.

d) Young people nowadays have an unhealthy obsession with celebrities. Discuss.

This was one of the most popular essay responses and on the whole candidates were well versed in the presentation of a discursive essay. Most candidates were able to show a clear development of ideas focusing on the topic of celebrities, role models and the degree to which the issue at hand can be considered an unhealthy one.

e) Use this sentence and underline it in a short story you decide to submit to a weekend magazine: "I just couldn't stop laughing."

This was the least popular title among candidates. Those who did choose this title coped well with the structure of a short story, presenting engaging storylines and also, in some cases, convincing character descriptions. Particularly successful answers saw candidates managing to ensure that the obligatory sentence was woven into the narrative rather than merely being inserted, almost as an afterthought.

f) An unforgettable sight

Candidates here fell largely into the two groups illustrated in a) above, with some responses managing to outline a clearly planned structure and adhere to it, but others resorting to a rambling account of a scene which often resembled that of a familiar film scene. Some candidates mistakenly took this title to indicate a narrative, suggesting perhaps that the expression "unforgettable sight" was not familiar to them, and this then led them to move somewhat out of point at times.

COMPREHENSION

General Comments

Overall, the text seems to have been well understood and engaged with. However, most of the difficulties may have been a result of the misreading or misunderstanding of the question. As a result of this, many of the questions answered by a considerable number of candidates were sometimes irrelevant and sometimes incorporated too much information, resulting in candidates repeating

themselves a little. Following this observation, one might encourage candidates to read through all the questions briefly, prior to organising their responses.

a. Candidates generally managed to infer the meanings of the given words but there were instances when the context was not taken into consideration. 'Wishful thinking' was a term that candidates seemed to find particularly difficult to define. There were attempts at defining the two words individually and, in so doing, the nuance of the entire expression was missed. When defining 'allegiance', the most common error was that candidates failed to realize that this was a noun and defined it as a verb instead. Many candidates inaccurately cited denotations along the lines of 'admiration' and 'approval' and did not provide the examiners with the key word 'loyalty'. The verb 'ravage' was also frequently equated with the adjective 'savage'. In general, it was noted that many candidates failed to explain verbs as verbs and nouns as nouns.

b. The majority of students provided a good answer to this question. However, it must be said that seeing this as quite a straightforward question, some students opted to give answers which were either extremely brief or answers that merely reformulated the phrase, giving answers such as 'The truth behind the myth.'

c. A considerable number of candidates got this question wrong, most probably due to a misreading of the question. The majority spoke about the Europeans' attitude towards gold rather than about the author's attitude towards the Europeans, as stated in the question. Thus, many of the answers were deemed irrelevant.

d. This was the question students seemed to find the most challenging. Many failed to realize the importance of having an eye-witness account that can be supported by archeological remains. Many paraphrased or lifted directly from the fifth paragraph without any reference to the information presented later on in the passage. Even those who realised that there was more information later on often did not attempt to put the answer in their own words but copied straight from the passage.

e. The majority of candidates provided a suitable answer to this question. Inaccurate answers were often due to candidates failing to mention that looters are still present in our day and age.

f. The question specifically asked for the two different points of view of two different cultures. In terms of content, the most common error was focusing on just the South American view. The weaker candidates missed the spiritual dimension of gold offerings completely.

Linking devices were rarely used in order to present the points in a logical way. Coherence was further hampered by problems with relative clauses. Furthermore, sentences were prolonged unnecessarily often without the use of proper punctuation.

While some of the candidates successfully attempted the task set within the given word limit, other responses were either far too short or excessively long, in both cases demonstrating a rather poor control over text organisation.

It should be noted that candidates are expected to use their own words in this exercise, and not lift words, phrases or larger chunks from the given text, particularly if these are not indicated as such, by using double quotation marks.

SECTION B – LITERATURE

General Comments

This level of study (that is, post-secondary, approaching tertiary education) requires candidates to demonstrate that they can go beyond the initial encounter with a text and engage more fully and critically with the text they are commenting on. In practical terms, examiners look for evidence that a candidate has tried to come to terms with key themes and portrayals of character in a way that goes beyond merely retelling stretches of the plot or storyline, or simply describing a character's most obvious traits. Candidates who attempt this more critical approach to their texts tend to produce stronger answers.

There has been a notably poorer standard for the gobbet questions this year. The rigours of observing the conventions established regarding a gobbet-style answer seem to have suddenly slackened in this year's scripts, with the result that answers in this format could well have just as easily been in response to open-ended essay styles. Minimal grounding in the set text and limited concern with the given extract suggest that many candidates are not sufficiently practised in or aware of the different type of response required of them in a gobbet question.

TEXT ANSWERS

1A. The Heart of the Matter

“The Heart of the Matter explores the difficulties in really understanding others.”
Discuss.

A good number of candidates attempted this question but very few foregrounded the factors/reasons contributing to dysfunctional relationships as the focus of their argumentation. Generally, the essays were simply concerned with the 'story' between two characters with some reference to lying, but candidates who scored high on this task did not limit their response to a focus on these two relationships alone. The difficulty in understanding others was also explored through an analysis of characters like Fr Rank and Yusef.

Motive, internal struggle, malice, self-centredness, escapism etc. were rarely underlined as the main points of discussion. Occasional suggestions of these ideas tended to be more a default of paraphrasing than themes the candidates were specifically concerned with.

1B. The Heart of the Matter

Compare and contrast Scobie's relationship with Louise and his relationship with Helen in *The Heart of the Matter*.

This was the most popular question. Not surprisingly, the majority of responses were clearly divided into two, the relationship of Scobie with Louise and the relationship of Scobie with Helen. Rather disappointingly, too many candidates wrote about the relationships without bothering to compare and contrast. Some weak answers actually 'concluded' the reference to the relationship between Scobie and Louise at the point when Louise leaves for South Africa. Too many who wrote about the two relationships and included Louise's return gave answers that approached a 'general summary' dictated by chronology and failed to focus sufficiently on the similarities between the two relationships. As is clear in the rubric, candidates were required both to compare and to contrast Scobie's relationship with his wife and that with his lover.

A good number of candidates showed evidence of training in character analyses, and did attempt to compare and contrast the relationships identifying themes such as religious concern, truth and lying, ugliness and pity as their points of discussion. In these good answers, the narrative was clearly subservient to argumentation.

1C. The Heart of the Matter

(Gobbet)

Nearly all the candidates who opted for the gobbet contextualised the passage correctly. Very few, however, were able to pitch their response at the level of discussion the passage provokes. Most fell back on and were limited to the dilemma at the level of relationships Scobie attempts to resolve through suicide. For most, the scene is one of a recently widowed wife and a consoling priest. Rarely did one come across answers that were particularly concerned with the notions of mercy in Christianity, dogma or the priest's sense of failure. The general drift of the candidates' argumentation was marked by a concern with the complications at a personal level caused by an adulterous relationship, an absence of the moral/religious debate and a non sequitur conclusion that, somehow, recalls the quote that the Church knows all the rules but not what goes on in the human heart. The kind of debate this particular extract suggests is a higher-order kind of discussion. Very few candidates evidenced a command of knowledge, fluency and writing skills to profit from the possibilities of this gobbet.

2A. Purple Hibiscus

Discuss gender issues as they arise in *Purple Hibiscus*.

Typical of answers on this novel, an account of what happens in Eugene's and Ifeoma's households always seems to generate enough examples to satisfy writing about gender, freedom, illusion and reality as well as a number of other themes explored in the novel. Given the text permits this, one cannot complain about coming across the same kind of material irrespective of the question. One does, however, expect candidates to go beyond. For example, writing about Eugene's treatment of Beatrice is undoubtedly valid when answering a question on gender, however, the essay need not include multiple examples all intended to show the same thing to a point that the essay does not progress much and little else is achieved. The better candidates were the ones who were able to show that while Eugene's treatment of Beatrice is one valid point in the argument, issues such as the broader social context; the evidence from tradition and custom; the difference in generations; the decision to emigrate; the behaviour of the priests are also facades of the argument on gender in the novel.

Candidates who scored higher on this task showed a thorough knowledge of the text and argued critically about gender stereotypes and the effects of such social norms on the various characters in the novel, substantiating their work with direct quotation from the novel throughout. Most responses evidenced a development in the argument that paralleled the main characters' development and, as a result, were poised and well structured.

A small percentage of students, however, tackled the task poorly, failing to point out the importance of the siblings' experience in Nsukka and the changes this brought about in the way they viewed their roles both within the family and within society.

2B Purple Hibiscus

Eugene is eager to impress the society around him with his Western ways. Discuss how this affects his family.

Most of the candidates attempting this question made reference in their answers to the most important points relevant to the task. These included the way Eugene treats his family; the positive image the community has of Eugene and Eugene's position on customs and tradition. These points were generally well supported with examples. Very few candidates who attempted this question fell short of this basic information or essentially failed to achieve the task. What should have been better at this level is the foregrounding of argument over narrative. The degree of narration in this question was beyond what is desirable and should not be accepted at this level.

Many students who opted to tackle this task failed to concentrate on Eugene's "Western ways" as the focus of the rubric required. As a result, many of the responses merely "reproduced" a character

analysis of Eugene that they seem to have prepared in advance. Whereas it is important that students learn to write and prepare such analyses in preparation for their exam, it is equally important for them to learn to properly tackle the task set.

On the other hand, candidates who gave due importance to the full rubric developed their argument accordingly, commenting on the missionaries' influence on Eugene before focusing on the affects of such an upbringing on his family.

2C. Purple Hibiscus

(Gobbet)

The gobbet was not the most popular question. It is possible that because the set passage was not a scene typical either of the Eugene or the Ifeoma household, candidates might have felt unsure what to focus their answer on even if they could contextualise the passage. This assumption is being made because of the various 'routes' taken by those who did opt to choose the gobbet. Some emphasised the transition stage the children were in, others opted to highlight the difference in attitudes towards customs and some explored the contrast between Kambili and Jaja and their cousins. These focuses were, of course, all valid and acknowledged.

3A A Man for all Seasons

More speaks of 'a very small area where a man must rule himself'. Discuss the theme of selfhood in *A Man for All Seasons*.

A good number of the answers to this question were very valid. The responses suggested good knowledge of the text and also provided 'wide angle' answers to the notion of selfhood in the play. As expected, answers underscored More's unfailing character but most also explored other shades of integrity and egocentrism evidenced by other characters in the drama. Some showed very little critical skill and demonstrated little knowledge beyond that of plot. The weaker candidates tended to focus their response solely on More and failed to develop their argument through an analysis of selfhood in characters such as Richard Rich, the Common Man and the King. The better answers managed this, and weaved into the argument the irony or paradox of More's death and the survival of egocentrics.

3B A Man for all Seasons

While King Henry appears on stage only once in *A Man For All Seasons* he has a crucial role in the play. Discuss.

Very few candidates opted for this question. Generally speaking, the answers were valid in that they showed a good knowledge of the historical background and were also clear in exposing the idea that what Bolt suggests in the play at plot and character level is invariably tied to King Henry. Not unlike

the answers given by candidates to (3a) above, the responses were crisp and not taxing on the reader to follow.

3C A Man for all Seasons

(Gobbet)

The gobbet was the second most popular question on *A Man for All Seasons*. All the candidates located the extract in terms of plot development. The development of the theme of convenience that emerges from the extract was, however, not always sustained and a number of answers drifted into a write up on characters with tenuous links to the central debate.

4A Atonement

Discuss the importance of guilt in Atonement.

Most candidates answering on *Atonement* attempted this question. The weaker answers – which were definitely not the majority – were limited to Briony's guilt and her eventual efforts to atone. Most of the weaker answers were not just limited to Briony but also rarely went beyond narrative. As discussed above with reference to a previous rubric, there was a marked tendency by some students to write off an essay about the theme of 'atonement' that they seem to have prepared in advance. This resulted in a number of students focusing primarily on atonement rather than guilt. Another aspect that hindered students' responses was their inability to pay attention to the difference between 'being guilty' and 'feeling guilty', which led to obviously erroneous conclusions that 'Robbie *is* guilty of not saving more lives' and the like.

In contrast, the better answers explored the theme of guilt with reference to a number of characters. The difference in the quality of these answers was then reflected in the sense of balance in the writing. Good essays were characterised by an ability to distinguish between Briony's feelings right after her 'crime' and the feelings of guilt she begins to have as an adolescent (and then throughout her adult life). A number of students were able to develop their essay by making reference to various other characters who, although they may not have felt guilty, were surely to blame for their actions.

4B Atonement

'Lola is an accomplice to the disaster.' Discuss.

A good number of candidates attempted this question. Most of the answers were average, essentially remaining at the narrative level. Possibly in an effort to distance themselves from simple paraphrasing, some candidates complicated their answer by including speculation as to what would have happened had certain events been different. Such speculation did not contribute positively to the

answers or turned narrative efforts into argumentative ones. On the contrary, it often led candidates to dead ends.

Many of the candidates who tackled this task failed to allow for the possibility that Lola had consensual sex with Paul Marshall as the first words uttered by Lola to Briony after the incident suggest ("I'm sorry, I didn't, I'm sorry..."). This point was, of course, crucial to the essay and candidates who overlooked it tended to portray Lola as a victim who was too scared to speak up. Admittedly, there is an element of ambiguity surrounding the incident that takes place on the island temple, yet it is important that students treat it as such and learn how to respond to the ambiguity in the novel rather than attempt to clarify or explain away what the author intended to remain ambiguous. Candidates who allowed for the possibility that Lola had consensual sex with Paul Marshall explored the issue of her culpability more fully and showed a great skill in presenting alternative portraits of Lola and different degrees of culpability.

4C Atonement

(Gobbet)

Few candidates opted for the gobbet and few of the answers given explored beyond the events that immediately precede and follow the dinner scene. Candidates failed to highlight the importance of the scene as one anticipating dramatic events. They were generally unable to demonstrate the false calmness and the tension of the moment, the point between Briony's assumptions about the love scene and the calamity of events to come. Candidates generally missed the way various characters are concerned with themselves and the way their lives will later be inextricably bound together.

Chairperson

2013 Examination Panel