

EXAMINERS' REPORT

INTERMEDIATE ENGLISH

FIRST SESSION 2018



**L-Università
ta' Malta**

**MATSEC
Examinations Board**

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General Information

GRADE	A	B	C	D	E	F	ABS	Total
NUMBER OF CANDIDATES	24	115	280	176	136	129	29	889
% OF TOTAL	2.70	12.94	31.50	19.80	15.30	14.51	3.26	100

This year's examination was the first following the introduction of the new syllabus which saw changes in each of the components in the written paper. Three of the main changes were that:

- in Section A, whenever the rubric indicated or specified how a title needs to be interpreted candidates were expected to adhere to the conventions of that text type.
- in Section B, besides being able to understand the source text at comprehension and inference level as well as being able to summarise an aspect of the text, candidates needed to 'be able to answer questions focusing on the grammar of the English language and to describe aspects of the communicative function of a given text.'
- in Section C, the gobbet task expected candidates to 'go beyond the plot and use evidence to engage with and write critically about what and how the author and/or the piece communicates.'

It has to be appreciated that the introduction of changes in each of the components in this examination could not but have translated into a number of challenges to all those preparing for the examination even because a single specimen paper available is rarely enough to really offer the reassurance as to whether the projected level is well calibrated for optimal preparation. The evidence from the candidates' responses is that the level of preparation was more than acceptable. Indeed, the general feel expressed by different examiners working independently on the different components was that there were no issues that manifested some misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the syllabus which needed to be underscored in this report. If a single thing needs to be highlighted it has to be the good performance of most candidates in part (a) of the gobbet question. As noted in the detailed comments later in this report, 'Most candidates satisfied acceptably enough the expectations in this task producing answers that showed an effort to engage critically with the set text and where sentence theme was often the author or the language used.'

Candidates' shortcomings varied. Many of these stem from a degree of carelessness, lack of focus or attention. For example, too many candidates miss earning better scores because they do not pay attention to the question or rubric; this is such that they show total disregard to word limit in the summary, or only partially answering a question. It is difficult to explain how candidates write an email when they are expected to write a report or answer a clearly indicated two part question (as the gobbet question in the Literary Awareness section) as one answer conflating the two parts in a manner that makes it impossible to distinguish between the two. Possibly, these shortcomings can be addressed without major difficulties. As expected, other shortcomings are evidently more challenging. These generally concern fluency and accuracy, as well as cohesion and coherence beyond the sentence level.

Written Paper

Section A

The new syllabus for this component includes clear indications as to what is expected in each of the text types. The candidates' responses suggest that these indications were not ignored and a good percentage of the efforts evidenced an attempt to follow the different conventions respecting the degree of freedom or lack of the titles permitted. This is very encouraging even because understanding the differences between text types and developing a discipline to follow

conventions has implications beyond the immediacy of this examination. This does not mean that there were no candidates who ignored convention, interpreted titles wrongly, had serious shortcomings in fluency and accuracy or paid no attention to punctuation. Candidates' shortcomings may be grouped into two types. Some shortcomings such as writing a report using the wrong format and without including subheadings or interpreting titles correctly may be corrected without too much difficulty. Unfortunately, some shortcomings such as subject verb agreement, using the proper tenses and stilted expressions seem more deep seated and suggest bigger challenges.

Essay Titles

a. The Descriptive Essay

Most of the candidates who attempted this title described a place in their town or village which was meaningful to them. The village square or Church, and beaches, were the most common choices. Some candidates only focused on one of the two elements in the title, thus their task was only partly achieved. As stated on page 9 of the 2018 syllabus, the purpose of a description is to present a clear and complete picture to the reader through the use of descriptive language which 'shows' rather than 'tells'. Some candidates, unfortunately, failed to achieve this due to non-detailed descriptions, limited vocabulary and use of adjectives, and overall poor command of the language. A few candidates also wrote about more than one place.

b. The Narrative

The majority of tasks evidenced typical features of a narrative (IM Syllabus p. 9). Most of the candidates who attempted this title interpreted it correctly by focusing on the theme of 'loss'. Most stories were first person narratives about the death of a family member or a close friend due to illness or an accident. *Loss through War* and *Loss of Identity* were also explored by a few candidates, resulting in mostly satisfactory narratives. Some of the stories were a pleasure to read as they showed both maturity and a relatively good command of the language. Weaker efforts had several inaccuracies in language usage, especially in the choice of tenses and the organisation of the story itself. Unfortunately, some candidates misinterpreted the title and wrote about 'being lost' rather than the theme of loss or wrote an expository piece rather than a story, with some even including advice.

c. Email of Application

This task was the least chosen by candidates. Most of the candidates who attempted this task organised the email appropriately yet did not always adopt a formal register. A few candidates did not follow the rubric in two ways: (1) they wrote about 'this summer' and 'this year' when the title clearly stated that the voluntary work would take place 'next year'; (2) two candidates signed the email appropriately using the given details (Evelyn Brown) yet referred to themselves as 'brother' and 'male student' throughout the task. Candidates are encouraged to read and follow the rubric carefully. One 'limitation' observed in these efforts was that 'disadvantaged children' was interpreted nearly exclusively as 'disabled children'.

d. The Opinion Essay

This task required candidates to present their personal opinion on the topic throughout the task. The majority of the candidates who attempted this task did not use opinion words to clearly state their opinion in the introduction (IM Syllabus p. 11). A few did not include them in any paragraph, thus their task read more like a discursive essay. Some candidates discussed both education and society yet failed to create a link between them. The stronger efforts did not only create this link but also developed their arguments, reinforced by reasons and explanations. Most of these candidates discussed and provided several examples of how education helps people become better citizens within society. The weaker efforts partially or superficially

developed their ideas, and/or presented several ideas within the same paragraph with poor logical progression and linking. This made it difficult for the reader to follow their argument.

e. The Discursive Essay

This was the most popular title among the candidates. Most of those who attempted this task realised that it is a Problem - Solution essay and attempted to outline the problem, its causes and effects in the introduction (IM Syllabus p. 12). Some of them, however, seemed to struggle to organise their thoughts properly, resulting in tasks which were underdeveloped and/or did not follow a logical sequence. The ideas presented in most tasks could have been further supported by examples, and better links. Cohesive devices were simplistic at times, repetitive and used incorrectly, thus affecting the readability of the text.

This task required candidates to discuss and present solutions as to how people can lead a healthier and more active lifestyle. The better efforts suggested a finer understanding of the subject and presented several valid solutions. Some candidates also discussed different aspects of health, namely physical, mental and emotional. The weaker efforts presented rather simplistic and superficial solutions in the solution/evaluation part of the essay.

The two elements of the task - 'sedentary' and 'unhealthy' lifestyle - were not always discussed. Some candidates only focused on food and nutrition, resulting in the task being only partly achieved.

Candidates are reminded that this is a formal task and requires formal language. Furthermore, opinion words should only feature in the conclusion and no new ideas should be presented in the concluding paragraph (IM Syllabus p. 12).

f. The Assessment Report

The assessment report is a systematically presented text which requires well-structured focused paragraphs. This was achieved by most of the candidates who attempted this task, although some did not include sub-headings and a few even wrote this as an email. The content was generally valid whereby the candidates presented and evaluated the positive and negative aspects of the subject (the various initiatives undertaken by the school with respect to waste reduction). 'Waste' was generally discussed in terms of plastic and recycling. It was also interpreted by a few candidates in relation to 'energy'.

Candidates are reminded that the use of the passive is encouraged in report writing, as is formal register in such contexts (IM Syllabus p. 13 and 14).

Section B

The candidates do not seem to have found the passage and the set questions particularly difficult and misunderstanding of questions or completely wrong responses were rare. There were, however, a couple of issues that should be addressed. Having understood that the text essentially functions as a personal development article specifically concerned with encouraging individuals to revisit their motivation when doing things, a good number of candidates tended to repeat this broad notion in most answers irrespective of the specific focus of different questions. For example, question 3b asks about the relationship between the first three sentences and the next two sentences. Answers (not a few) returning to the idea that one should not expect to be appreciated because gratitude is beyond one's control were basically irrelevant to the question. Another problem (in a way not completely unrelated to the first) was that a good number of candidates seemed unsure as to whether they had written enough to answer certain questions and kept lengthening their answers unnecessarily with content that was not immediately relevant. For example, paraphrasing the whole Belisarius story as part answer to question 4 was essentially useless. Candidates need to understand that not answering questions crisply by

including irrelevant content and waffle leads to 'approximate' responses that cannot possibly be awarded the highest scores. In conclusion, candidates did not demonstrate particular problems in understanding the text (comprehension), its structure and function, but ought to be more focused, precise and disciplined in their understanding of the focus of the set tasks and the responses expected of them.

Questions

Q1. The first question focused on text type. Nearly all the candidates identified the correct answer. Not surprisingly, a number were, however, unable to give more than one reason for their choice.

Q2. The question required candidates to understand and comment on the effectiveness of the repeated 'you' in a sequence of short sentences. The candidates were expected to comment fully by bringing out the effect of the repetition as well as the effect of the directness in the pronoun. Most candidates stopped short of either one or the other.

Q3. The task focused on the effectiveness of the first three short, syntactically similar sentences and the contrast between these three sentences and the next two longer ones. Few candidates managed to answer both (a) and (b) correctly. Of some consolation is that a number of candidates who kept their answers focused tried to write about a possible form of relationship between the two sets of sentences even if they did not write about the contrast. As mentioned in the General Comments, too many candidates failed to limit their answer to the rhetorical choices the questions were concerned with and drifted into the Belisarius narrative.

Q4. This question required candidates to write about the effect of an example to better illustrate the aim of the text. The responses suggested that, generally speaking, candidates knew why the Belisarius story was included by the author; however, too many answers were not 'calibrated' properly and included too much detail from the story when such detail was not necessary.

Q5. The question was based on the visual in the text. The majority of candidates correctly made the link between the photograph and the main theme of the passage. Marks were lost only when candidates elaborated by using background knowledge to interpret the meaning of the 'light source' or explained the link by simply limiting it to some personal experience that influenced them positively in their personal life, thus, giving an example rather than an explanation.

Q6. The question tested the candidates' knowledge of sentence types. It was disappointing to note that the majority of candidates failed to either identify the sentence type or to correctly explain the components that make this an example of a compound sentence.

Q7. The question asked candidates to underline the subject in the given sentence. It was rather disappointing to note that the majority of candidates failed to identify the subject correctly. Most candidates either underlined just one of the nouns in the subject or, even worse, underlined words or phrases from the predicate.

Q8. This question targeted the candidates' comprehension of a part of the text. The majority of the candidates understood the word 'externals' but full marks were gained only by those candidates who elaborated using their own words and remained within the context of the passage.

Q9. The summary was very much within the candidates' ability. A generally good performance was noted as the candidates correctly brought out the contrast between people's and the author's own definition of success. The writing was generally accurate and coherent so that most summary paragraphs could be understood by a reader without needing to read the source text. There were instances of weak summary skills when candidates gave examples or even

quoted from the text and/or just glossed over or ignored one of the two perspectives of the notions of success presented in the passage. Other shortcomings included ignoring the stipulated word count and not giving the answer in a single paragraph.

Section C

The candidates' responses suggest that there was proper preparation for this component. Except for some rare instances of confusion between names or minor details, candidates demonstrated good knowledge of all the stories they made reference to not just at basic plot line or character level but also evidenced they were in touch with themes, patterns of action, style and tone. There was also a clear effort to be concerned with the specific focus of the attempted questions and write generally relevant answers rather than regurgitated ones. Only a very small percentage of candidates limited their answer to simply narrating a short story. This is not to say that there were no shortcomings. The following are a few points future candidates should try to remember.

- i. In the essay question (number 1) the major problem was with the choice of story by some candidates. The question permitted candidates to choose any of the short stories and write about the importance of the physical setting in that short story. It is obvious that some stories provide a better opportunity to write about this aspect than others. The quality of answers given by candidates showed a clear distinction between the responses of candidates who chose wisely and could easily foreground the physical setting in their answer and those answers which were based on a poor choice and found it difficult to maintain focus throughout.
- ii. The 'gobbet' question was divided into two parts. A good number of candidates ignored this and gave one long essay-like answer incorporating points particular to both question a) and b). While in some instances it was not immediately difficult to identify which part of a response was relevant to which part of the questions, in other instances it was problematic for examiners to make this distinction.
- iii. Another issue relevant to the 'gobbet' question was the length of the answers for questions a) and b). Question a) carried 13 marks while question b) carried 17 marks. This should have been considered as an indication that the b) answer needed to be longer than the a) answer. There were quite a few instances where candidates answered question a) relatively well deservedly earning an acceptable score and then undermined their performance by writing a short, limited and sketchy single paragraph response for question b) when it carried more marks than question a).

Questions

Question 1

The better performances in the essay on the importance of the physical setting in a short story of their choice started with candidates choosing intelligently. Generally speaking, candidates who opted to focus on stories like 'The Drover's Wife', 'The Rough Crossing' and 'The Voyage' wrote better essays than candidates who opted to write on stories like 'No Place to Park', 'Mother's Help' and 'The Teddy-Bear's Picnic'. Story choice seems to have been a main contributor as to whether candidates could write responses that clearly foregrounded physical setting or not. Irrespective of choice, another noticeable distinction was between the better responses and the weaker ones was evident when candidates were able to write essays with the topic idea of body paragraphs clearly focused on aspects or characteristics of the physical setting. In the better essays, reference to plot/action and/or character/s tended to function as support to the argument on physical setting. In contrast, the weaker essays tended to be primarily driven by a focus on plot or character with references to physical setting included by default rather than through a sustained focus.

Question 2(a)

Candidates attempted to comment on and analyse the use of language, mostly focusing on the contrast in the colours, on Fenella (and how she was in the beginning compared to later on in the story), and some tried to analyse the use of dialogue. There were attempts to analyse what the passage revealed about the relationship between Fenella and her grandmother, with some homing in on what Fenella was feeling. A good number of candidates mentioned technical terms such as metaphor, pathetic fallacy, and simile. Most candidates prepared acceptable responses which addressed critical engagement with the set text, and where sentence theme was often the author or the language. Candidates who retold the story of how Fenella found herself on the boat, as well as those who merely listed the images from the passage without analysis (often writing comments such as 'to make the reader picture the scene') often underperformed.

Question 2(b)

The main distinction in candidates' performance was between those who narrated the story and those who attempted to analyse the idea of transition (and how this is played out by the author). Valid attempts of analysis included the contrast between the literal and metaphorical journey made by Fenella, an in-depth discussion of the symbolic significance of the umbrella, and the narrative as a coming-of-age account. Weaker responses exhibited little to no evidence of analysis (with a number of candidates who barely mentioned the umbrella or not at all), but merely presented a summarised account of the story. Links between the passage and the rest of the short story were not always evident or properly sustained.

Chairperson
Examination Panel 2018