

EXAMINERS' REPORT

SEC ENGLISH LANGUAGE

MAIN SESSION 2018



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1.0 GENERAL INFORMATION AND STATISTICS

In May 2018, a total of 4117 candidates registered for the SEC English examination. Of these, 2769 candidates sat for Paper A and 1348 candidates sat for Paper B.

Table 1: Percentage of candidates registering for Paper A and Paper B

YEAR	NUMBER OF CANDIDATES	% PAPER A	% PAPER B
2018	4117	67.3	32.7
2017	4366	62.9	37.1
2016	4611	63.2	36.8
2015	4733	58.6	41.4
2014	5146	58.1	41.9
2013	5121	56.7	43.3

1.1 ABSENCES

Of the 4117 registered candidates, 82 (2%) were absent for all the components of the examination. In Paper A, 29 (1%) of the 2769 candidates were absent, whereas 53 (3.9%) of the 1348 candidates were absent for Paper B.

Table 2: Number and percentage of absentees for Paper A and Paper B

YEAR	PAPER A		PAPER B		TOTAL	
2018	29	0.7%	53	1.3%	82	2.0%
2017	23	0.5%	66	1.5%	89	2.0%
2016	29	0.6%	80	1.7%	109	2.4%
2015	22	0.5%	81	1.7%	103	2.2%
2014	29	0.6%	63	1.2%	92	1.8%
2013	14	0.3%	49	1.0%	63	1.2%

1.2 GRADE DISTRIBUTION

The overall performance of the candidates in the SEC English May 2018 session is indicated in the table below:

Table 3: Grade Distribution for SEC English May 2018

GRADE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	U	ABS	TOTAL
PAPER A	224	513	726	570	458			249	29	2769
PAPER B				126	321	273	199	376	53	1348
NUMBER OF CANDIDATES	224	513	726	696	779	273	199	625	82	4117
% OF TOTAL	5.44	12.46	17.63	16.91	18.92	6.63	4.83	15.18	1.99	100

2.0 PAPER 1

2.1 PAPER 1 PART 1: LISTENING AND SPEAKING (50 MARKS)

a. Listening Comprehension (30 marks)

This component of the examination is designed to assess the candidates' ability to attend to, process and respond to auditory information. The tasks set tested their ability to listen for gist and for specific information and required minimal writing. This was done to ensure, as far as possible, the validity of the test.

Candidates in all sessions listened to two different texts which were comparable in length and difficulty. They then attempted three brief tasks on the first text and two tasks on the second text.

Text A

Each session consisted of a transcript of a radio programme about famous legends and was assessed by means of three tasks. The first of these consisted of a matching information exercise which tested candidates' ability to listen for specific information. The second task required candidates to mark six statements true or false as well as to provide a reason. Lastly, candidates were presented with three statements and asked to underline the one which best summarised the text.

Performance

Overall, candidates fared well when answering questions about this text. Most did particularly well in exercises 1 and 3. Although the majority of candidates found little difficulty in selecting true or false correctly, the same cannot be said for giving a reason from the text. The information required was minimal and centred around a key word or phrase, yet this part of the task cost candidates marks as many were unable to provide a satisfactory reason. Most candidates were able to select the statement in the third exercise correctly.

Text B

Each session consisted of a transcript of a radio programme about recipes in a series called 'The Best of British Cooking.' Candidates were required to complete two tasks: order the steps of the recipe and complete a grid with items of information.

Performance

Candidates performed satisfactorily in this text with most faring better in exercise 2. Weaker candidates stumbled in exercise 1 which required minimal writing and tested their understanding of the steps of the procedure adopted in the recipe. The majority of candidates fared well in exercise 2 with a few losing marks when they did not select the correct information from the text.

General Comments

Candidates' performance in this component of the paper was satisfactory with many attaining slightly higher marks in the second text.

b. Speaking – Visual Prompt (10 marks)

This task in the oral component of the paper consists of a visual prompt which is intended to generate a brief discussion about a topic as stipulated in the language area of the syllabus. This year, candidates were presented with two contrasting pictures related to the environment. The pictures were selected to serve as a springboard for discussion and in no way were candidates expected to scrutinize them for detail. Two sets of questions were presented to candidates. The questions in the first set required candidates to describe the first picture, compare it to the second picture and then speak about a particular aspect of the environment. The second set consisted of six questions and examiners were instructed to choose three of them to ask candidates about their relationship with environmental problems and various ways of dealing with them.

Performance

It was noted that candidates fared well in this task mainly due to their familiarity with the topic. Most found little difficulty engaging in conversation and were able to make use of the language of comparison adequately. Candidates were able to speak about problems concerning the environment, with many giving examples which were topical at the time of the examination. Those who produced single-word responses and who made use of Maltese words and phrases, especially as fillers, fared less well.

c. Speaking – Role Play (10 marks)

The second part of the speaking component requires candidates to take on a role in a relatively realistic situation and to follow a number of prompts in order to be able to engage in a conversation with the examiner.

The role play required candidate to talk to a friend about activities related to a particular season of the year. Each role-play situation presented five prompts, which guided the candidates to talk about activities they like and dislike doing at a particular time of the year and then to persuade their friend to join them the following weekend.

Performance

Candidates did fairly well in this task, the context of which was clearly familiar to them and it was noted that many adopted the correct register. Those who struggled did so either because they missed the prompts or because they lacked the language competence to complete the task.

General Comments

Most candidates handled both tasks well, with a level of interaction that was up to standard and an effective use of language. Instances of highly competent, articulate speakers who were clearly engaged in the task, were noted. Equally, there were a few responses which were characterised by limited vocabulary and generally poor command of the language.

2.2 PAPER 1 PART 2: LANGUAGE USE (50 MARKS)

The second component of Paper 1 is designed to assess candidates' grammatical and socio-linguistic competence. Accuracy and appropriateness of language as used in a variety of contexts in everyday life, are tested by means of this write-on paper.

This year, the Language Use paper presented nine tasks which were all contextualised in order to make them meaningful. Gap-fill tasks tested the following grammatical items:

- Prepositions
- Question and word formation
- Phrasal verbs
- Idioms
- Tenses

Sentence re-writing, on the other hand, tested candidates in their handling of sentence structure as well as their ability to make use of correct punctuation and spelling.

Performance

Candidates who fared well in this component of the paper demonstrated sound grammatical and socio-linguistic competence giving correct responses and making use of accurate spelling and punctuation. However, poor performance was noted in the following instances:

Exercise 1 tested prepositions. The most challenging item in this first task was (e) as many candidates wrote *in front* instead of *ahead*.

Exercise 2 tested question formation. Marks were lost mainly because candidates did not form questions correctly and/or did not produce a question which matched the answer given. Common errors included *How much calories do you burn?* in (c) as well as *What is my option?* in (d).

Exercise 3 tested word formation. Candidates who fared badly did not pay attention to the context and consequently gave *creations* or *creating* in (c). The most challenging item proved to be (g) with many resorting to *earthed* in the place of *unearthed*.

Exercise 4 tested phrasal verbs. The majority of candidates struggled in this task with many failing not only to come up with the correct preposition but with any preposition at all.

Exercise 5 was a cloze exercise. This task proved to be a stumbling block for candidates who lack competence and who fail to make use of context to come up with the correct language item.

Exercise 6 tested idiomatic expressions. Once again, this task proved challenging to candidates who are not familiar with everyday idioms. Items (e), (f) and (h) were the most common correct ones while many candidates failed to answer (i) and (j) correctly.

Exercise 7 tested punctuation. Overall, candidates scored well in this task. However, changing the structure of the sentences rather than copying them cost candidates marks as did placing the comma outside the speech marks.

Exercise 8 tested tenses. Candidates who fared badly did not take heed of the time reference as a clue for providing the correct tense, misspelt verbs and ignored subject-verb agreement. The most challenging item proved to be (b) with candidates showing poor knowledge of the past perfect tense.

Exercise 9 tested sentence rewriting. Candidates lost marks because they rewrote the sentences incorrectly with many failing to demonstrate awareness of the correct structure following the verb 'suggested' in (e).

General Comments

The Language Use component of the examination is indicative of candidates' knowledge and competence of the English language. Once again, candidates sitting for both Paper A and Paper B found little difficulty in the punctuation exercise. The same cannot be stated about most of the other tasks. Prepositions, question formation, tenses and sentence rewriting proved to be the most problematic.

This component of the exam focusses entirely on accuracy. Therefore, paying special attention to spelling, punctuation and handwriting which is as clear as possible, is of paramount importance. Furthermore, candidates are urged to read through the whole exercise before attempting to answer in order to benefit from contextual clues.

3.0 PAPER 2

3.1 PAPER 2 QUESTION 1: WRITING (40 MARKS)

In this section of the paper, candidates were required to choose one of three titles and write about it accurately and fluently. The word count stipulated by the rubric is 320 to 350 for Paper A candidates and 180 to 200 words for Paper B candidates.

All candidates were instructed to pay particular attention to vocabulary, grammar, paragraphing, layout, spelling and punctuation. In both Paper A and Paper B, the choice consisted of a short story, an article or an email therefore testing candidates' ability to narrate, describe, argue and express their views as set out in the English Language syllabus in tasks that presented a clear audience and purpose.

Performance

Question 1: Writing

All three tasks were attempted to varying degrees by candidates who opted for Paper 2A and those who opted for Paper 2B. The most popular choice among all candidates was the email while the least popular among Paper 2A candidates was the short story and the article among Paper 2B candidates.

TABLE 4 – Percentage Distribution of Writing Tasks in Paper 2 Question 1

Task Type	Paper 2A %	Paper 2B%
Short story	16.9	30.4
Article	20.9	17.1
Email	62.2	52.5

Generally, candidates demonstrated the ability to write realistic, well-sequenced stories in cohesive paragraphs. Similarly, there were instances of articles which were well-organised and relevant to the title. In general, emails were written in the correct style and layout. Candidates who fared well made use of a wide range of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, accurate spelling and punctuation and correct sentence structure and tenses. Their writing was within the word limit.

Evidence of weak writing was also noted, however. Marks were forfeited when the writing presented did not fulfill the general marking criteria:

Task Achievement and Relevance

Titles which were not well-considered produced writing which was partly relevant or completely irrelevant in content and style. In the narrative, marks were lost mainly for writing in which the storyline was weak and the characters unconvincing. Writing which was repetitive or which went off at a tangent was noted in the case of the article with candidates often overstating their point. Marks were lost for emails which did not fulfil the purpose and were not written in a manner which was appropriate to the audience.

Fluency and Accuracy

Fluency suffered when coherence between and within paragraphs was weak with very few linking words being used or none at all. It was noted that the use of vocabulary was restricted and at times inaccurate, and this resulted in a poor communication of ideas.

Lack of accuracy cost candidates marks with tenses, spelling and punctuation often being the main culprits. Failing to distinguish one tense from another as well as an indiscriminate use of different tenses in the same paragraph and/or sentence was commonly observed. Marks were also lost for lack of punctuation and incorrect spelling even in words which appeared in the title. A significant number of candidates lost marks for writing which went over the stipulated word count. Similarly, others lost marks for writing which was below the word count.

General Comments

This component of the paper allows candidates to demonstrate their ability to achieve the task set with a particular audience in mind. The basic requirements of fluency and accuracy are essential in order for this to be achieved. In the narrative, the writing was expected to be well-organised, relevant to the title and the storyline realistic. Clear, well-expressed and relevant points of view were expected in the article while the appropriate tone was expected in both the formal and informal email.

It is evident that some candidates lack the ability to adhere to the title and also find difficulty identifying the form and function required by the title chosen. Clearly, such candidates would benefit from a more careful consideration of the title before they start writing. The importance of planning and editing their work cannot be emphasised enough.

3.2 PAPER 2 QUESTION 2: READING AND WRITING (60 MARKS)

This component tests reading and writing skills by means of a reading comprehension which includes a summary task and a short writing task.

Both papers included two texts, comparable in length and difficulty with varying topics and text types. Candidates were required to answer a number of questions about these reading texts and these set out to assess the following sub-skills: reading for gist, reading for detail, inference, working out the meaning of vocabulary from context, summarising part of the information and working out the author's purpose. This was done through a variety of question-types, namely multiple choice, inference and short-answer questions as well as questions locating specific information and True or False and give a reason questions.

A read-and-respond task, in which candidates were required to write a dialogue between two friends, was also set in Paper 2A and Paper 2B. A word count of 60 to 80 words and 50 to 60 words respectively was specified for this task.

Performance

Question 2: Reading and Writing in Paper A

Passage 1

The first question tested the understanding of the main idea of the introductory paragraph which provided background information to the rest of the text. Candidates lost marks for vague answers which did not include the change the question asked for.

Questions 2 and 5 tested the understanding of a phrase in the text. Most candidates answered correctly in question 2 with a few losing the mark because they made use of the incorrect tense and wrote *is becoming extinct* or because they failed to understand the meaning and implication of *the same fate* and left the phrase unchanged in their answer. In question 5, candidates lost marks when they did not latch on to the connection between size and the impressive presence of the birds and simply compared the weight of the male and female solitaires.

Questions 3, 4, 6 sought to check understanding of parts of the text at sentence level. Most candidates answered question 3 correctly with those who fared less well losing marks for lifting from the text. In question 4, some candidates lost marks when they failed to make the connection between reduced food or habitat and fighting for territory and food. Candidates who wrote facts from outside the range of lines indicated in question 6, lost marks for this.

Question 7 required candidates to scan a number of lines in the text in order to find synonyms for the four words given. While most candidates provided the correct synonyms, others forfeited marks for misspelling the words or not giving a single word as indicated by the rubric.

Question 8 presented candidates with four statements to mark True or False and to provide a suitable reason in order to demonstrate their understanding of the specific information in the text. The last statement (d), proved to be the most challenging with many candidates falling short of providing a reason and some stating that there was no evidence to be found in the text.

Question 9 required candidates to summarise the similarities and differences between the solitaire and the dodo. Those who fared well started the summary with a topic sentence and included the information required making proper use of linkers and correct grammatical structures and spelling.

Questions 10 and 11 were intended to test candidates' ability to locate specific information. In general, answers in question 10 were incomplete because they only contained *the bone remains* and *the preserved skins* with no reference to caves, deposits and museums in the first part and no mention of live specimen on the island in the second part. Most candidates found no difficulty identifying the correct part of the sentence in question 11.

Passage 2

Question 1 required candidates to explain a phrase from the first paragraph of the text. While many candidates gave a correct answer, marks were lost for answers which did not go beyond simply providing another word or expression for *blank look*, indicating lack of comprehension of the key word *suggest* in the question.

Questions 2 tested candidates' understanding at paragraph level. In general, this question did not pose any difficulty with answers including both of the parts required. Marks were lost when answers were simply lifted from the text and when travelling to far and unknown parts of the world was not mentioned.

Questions 3, 4, 7 and 11 tested candidates' skill in locating specific information in the text. For the most part, candidates fared well in question 3 which did not require them to make use of their own words. Marks were lost in question 4 when candidates failed to identify the correct phrasal verb with many only providing part of the verb. In general, candidates answered questions 7 and 11 correctly.

Questions 5, 8 and 10 required candidates make use of their inferential skills. Since it was not necessary for candidates to answer in their own words, question 5 was not problematic. The same cannot be said for question 8 which caused candidates to struggle. Marks were lost when answers failed to include that practising one's responses would eventually make them automatic. A good majority answered question 10 correctly.

Question 6 required candidates to scan the text in order to find antonyms to the words given. While answers were mostly correct, instances of *not accompanied* in the place of *solo* were noted and penalised.

Question 9 required a part sentence from the text and most candidates quoted this correctly.

Candidates who fared well in questions 12 and 13 gave complete and accurate answers. The most challenging item in question 13 was (f) with many answers failing to include the word *rowing*.

Writing

The read-and-respond writing task required candidates to write a brief dialogue between two friends, one encouraging the other to join a school fun run. There were instances of good writing in terms of task achievement with many clearly making adequate use of the language of persuasion. However, scores were low when candidates wrote an email or a letter instead of a dialogue, introduced a third character or included speech marks in their writing. Inaccuracies in grammar and spelling were common as was failure to keep to the word count.

Question 2: Reading and Writing in Paper B

Passage 1

In question 1 candidates were required to locate two phrases in the text. Most candidates found little difficulty with this while those who did lost marks because their response exceeded the three-word limit.

Questions 2 and 12 were intended to check the ability of candidates to select and retrieve information from the text. Most listed all the facts required from the range of lines indicated.

Questions 3 and 13 were intended to test the understanding at sentence level. In question 3, candidates who fared well provided answers which referred to the island's unpleasant past while those who fared less well did so for not making use of their own words. In question 13, full marks were awarded for response which showed how an interest in visiting the island is only logical after reading the article.

Question 4 tested the ability to infer why the production of chemical weapons had to be kept secret. A good number of candidates explained how being part of the Geneva Protocol meant that they were forbidden from manufacturing chemical weapons.

Questions 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10 required candidates to select and retrieve information from the text. In question 5, most candidates provided one of the measures taken by Japan while only a few could provide a correct answer in the second part. The majority of candidates found little difficulty answering the rest of the questions correctly.

Question 7 required candidates to scan the text for synonyms. In general, the correct words were identified by candidates with many finding (a) the most challenging, however.

Question 11 tested the ability of candidates to identify the purpose of the text and the majority did so successfully.

Passage 2

Question 1 tested the main idea of the introductory paragraph and most candidates fared well here.

Questions 2 and 5 were intended to test the skill of locating specific information in the text. In general, most candidates fared well with the exception of a few who misspelt words lifted from the text.

Question 3 was a two-part question which tested comprehension at sentence level. Candidates found the second part less challenging and those who fared well kept to the specified limit of four words.

Question 4 tested the ability to analyse the writer's intention through use of language. Candidates lost marks for lifting directly from the text without attempting to make use of their own words.

Question 6 required candidates to mark a set of five statements True or False and provide a suitable reason to demonstrate their understanding of specific information in the text. In general, candidates found some difficulty providing an adequate reason with (a), (b) and (d) proving the most challenging.

Questions 7, 8 and 10 were intended to test vocabulary and the majority did well. Question 8 tested understanding of both forward and backward references in the text. The last item, (f) was found challenging by a good number of candidates. No particular problems were noted in questions 7 and 10.

Question 9 was intended to test candidates' ability to summarise information in a text. Content was often relevant but the attempts of many candidates were marked down for grammatical accuracy, including incorrect spelling, tenses and sentence structure. Exceeding the word limit cost candidates marks as did copying chunks from the text.

General Comments

The two reading texts in both papers were varied, interesting and the questions clear. A number of candidates managed to score highly in the brief writing task but then lost marks when reading for specific information was required.

It is necessary for candidates to read the text and the questions closely so as to take note of the key words. Doing this will give them a clear indication of what is required of them and allow them to provide relevant answers.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Overall, it is noted that the 2018 cohort performed relatively well in the oral and aural components of the paper. There was a slight improvement in the short writing task following the reading comprehension for both Paper 2A and 2B.

In conclusion, it seems clear that what is required to improve students' competence is less emphasis placed on mechanical, decontextualised grammar exercises which do not translate into better language competence and more opportunity to practise the four skills of the language. More time needs to be spent encouraging students to read and listen to authentic material, as well as to motivating them to write and speak fluently.

Chairperson
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