



L-Università
ta' Malta

MATSEC
Examinations Board



Examiners' Report

SEC English Language

Special September Session 2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A.	STATISTICAL INFORMATION	2
	Registrations	2
	Absences	2
	Grade distribution	3
B.	GENERAL REMARKS	3
	Paper 1 Part 1: Listening and Speaking (50 marks)	3
	Paper 1 Part 2: Language Use (50 marks).....	3
	Performance.....	4
	General Comments	5
	Paper 2 Question 1: Writing (40 marks)	5
	Task Achievement and relevance.....	5
	Fluency and accuracy	6
	General comments	6
	Paper 2 Question 2: Reading and Writing (60 marks)	6
	Performance.....	6
	Question 2: Reading and Writing in Paper A	6
	Question 2: Reading and Writing in Paper B.....	9
C.	CONCLUDING COMMENTS	11

A. STATISTICAL INFORMATION

In September 2020, a total number 1267 candidates registered to sit for SEC English Language. This is a drop of 3142 registrations when compared to the May 2019 session. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about the closure of schools in March 2020 and the examination session could not be held in May.

Registrations

In September 2020, a total of 1267 candidates registered for the SEC English Language examination. Of these, 518 sat for Paper A and 749 for Paper B.

Year	Number of candidates	% Paper A	% Paper B
2020	1267	40.9	59.1
2019	4409	64.7	35.3
2018	4117	67.3	32.7
2017	4366	62.9	37.1
2016	4611	63.2	36.8
2015	4733	58.6	41.4

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

Absences

Of the 1267 candidates registered, 166 (13.1%) were absent for all the components of the examination. Of the 518 Paper A candidates, 76 (14.6 %) were absent, whereas 90 (12%) of Paper B candidates were absent.

Year	Paper A		Paper B		Total	
2020	76	14.6%	90	12%	166	13.1%
2019	80	2.8%	143	9.0%	222	5.0%
2018	29	1%	53	3.9%	82	2.0%
2017	23	0.8%	66	4.1%	89	2.0%
2016	29	0.6%	80	1.7%	109	2.4%
2015	22	0.5%	81	1.7%	103	2.2%

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

Grade distribution

The overall performance of candidates who sat for the English Language examination in September 2020 is indicated below:

GRADE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	U	ABS	TOTAL
PAPER A	35	95	121	86	81	-	-	24	76	518
PAPER B	-	-	-	56	216	172	103	112	90	749
TOTAL	35	95	121	142	297	172	103	136	166	1267
% OF TOTAL	2.8	7.5	9.6	11.2	23.4	13.6	8.1	10.7	13.1	100.0

Table 3: Distribution of grades for SEC English Language Special September Session 2020

B. GENERAL REMARKS

Paper 1 Part 1: Listening and Speaking (50 marks)

These components of the examination were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All candidates were awarded full marks in both components.

Paper 1 Part 2: Language Use (50 marks)

Grammatical and socio-linguistic competence is assessed in this component which carries a 25% weighting. In this write-on paper, candidates are tested on accuracy as well as on their ability to produce appropriate language as used in a variety of contexts in everyday situations. It is worth stressing that spelling and punctuation errors are penalised in all tasks in this paper.

The Language Use paper presented candidates with nine contextualised tasks thus ensuring that what is being tested is their ability to use language in context. These tasks required them to match, fill in the gaps and complete sentences.

The following grammatical items were tested by means of gap-fill tasks:

- Word formation
- Prepositions
- Tenses
- Quantifiers
- Linking words

The candidates' ability to handle sentence structure, make use of the correct punctuation and spelling was tested by means of sentence completion while their socio-linguistic competence was tested by means of a matching task.

Performance

Candidates who fared well in this component demonstrated competence in handling the language accurately and appropriately. However, poor performance was noted in the following instances:

Exercise 1 tested candidates' ability to form words by adding prefixes and suffixes as well as by forming the comparative form of adjectives. For many, (f) was a stumbling block with many writing *considering* or *considerate* instead of the correct *considerable*. Poor spelling cost candidates marks throughout but especially in (a) and (i).

Exercise 2 presented candidates with short utterances and required them to match these with an appropriate response. Those who lost marks did so because they lacked knowledge of colloquialisms such as *gutted* or fixed expressions such as *Not at all*.

Exercise 3 dealt with prepositions in the context of a short article about electric scooters in Copenhagen. A good number of candidates had difficulty applying the correct preposition throughout. Many found (e) challenging and gave *by* instead.

Exercise 4 focussed on the candidates' ability to handle different tenses. Ignoring the time markers in the context cost candidates marks with many missing the words *this week... so far* and giving *was* instead of *have been* in (e). The difference between the present and past perfect tenses was a challenge to many candidates with many giving *had been studying* instead of *have been studying* in (i).

Exercise 5 was a cloze text in which candidates were required to fill in the missing words according to the context. Many struggled with this task mainly due to an inability to make use of the context for meaning. The difference between *when* and *if* proved to be problematic for many as was evident in (c) with many giving the former as the answer. In addition, many lost marks for (j) by giving *new*, clearly demonstrating a lack of understanding of the gist of the passage.

Exercise 6 required candidates to fill in the blanks with words which show quantity. The most frequent incorrect answer occurred in (d) with many candidates giving *both, some* or *many*.

Exercise 7 focussed on reported speech set in an everyday context and proved challenging to a great deal of candidates. Many wrote a completely irrelevant exchange between the two speakers and those who attempted to change from direct to reported speech, found difficulty handling the tenses correctly. Instances of candidates copying the sentences given and simply adding speech marks were also noted.

Exercise 8 dealt with linking words which candidates were provided with in a word bank. Many lost marks because they failed to establish the correct link between the ideas presented in the context. In addition, candidates who failed to notice the word *that* as clue for notwithstanding in (f), gave *despite* instead.

Exercise 9 tested sentence rewriting in a context in a way that the meaning remained the same. This task proved challenging to many with tenses, spelling and punctuation being the most common areas in which errors were made.

General Comments

This component of the paper focusses on the accurate use of language and gives a clear indication of the candidates' ability in this area. While candidates did well in the tasks assessing colloquial language and quantity, many struggled with tenses, reported speech and sentence rewriting.

As they are in other components, candidates are expected to read the rubric in the part of the examination very carefully. They are also expected to write their answers as clearly as possible and to pay careful attention to their spelling and punctuation. Candidates would do well to read the whole text in each exercise in order to work out meaning from the context provided before attempting any of the answers.

Paper 2 Question 1: Writing (40 marks)

All three titles in Paper A and Paper B were attempted by candidates, albeit to varying degrees. This is illustrated in the percentages shown below.

Task type	Paper 2A %	Paper 2B %
Short story	47.7	31.4
Article	38.1	32.4
Diary entry	14.2	-----
Email	-----	36.2

Table 4: Percentages of titles chose in Paper 2 Question 1 for Paper A and Paper B

In general, there were instances of good writing in both Paper A and Paper B in which the pieces produced were fluent, mostly accurate and they provided interesting reading. In these cases, a number of short stories were engaging; the articles were well-structured and displayed a satisfactory range of thematic vocabulary; the diary entries and informal emails were well-written with a clear focus on the purpose and audience.

There were, however, instances of weak writing in both papers with candidates forfeiting marks for weak, often unidiomatic expression as well as grammatical inaccuracy. More specifically, marks were lost in the following areas as set out in the marking criteria:

Task Achievement and relevance

Writing which was partly or completely irrelevant cost candidates marks. This was the case in both papers for those who chose the story mainly because of poor pacing in the narrative, with candidates writing lengthy introductions and then bringing the story to an abrupt end. The task was also not achieved when, for instance, in the story Paper A candidates went off track by focussing more on the problematic situation e.g., the imprisonment, than on the breaking free. Similarly, in Paper B, more attention was given to the adventure that preceded the need for being rescued, than on the rescue operation itself.

The article in both papers proved to be challenging in that the writing failed to address the purpose and audience. In addition, many candidates in Paper A wrote about what can be done to make this a better world and failed to adhere to the title and include what they themselves can do.

Notwithstanding the specific instruction for reflection to be included, many diary entries were found to be weak since candidates only produced a narrative account of a teacher's day at school. Many who chose to

write the informal email in Paper B lost marks because they signed off in a formal manner and because they did not include advice on how to study.

Fluency and accuracy

Lack of coherence cost candidates marks as did the poor use of linking words either between and/or within paragraphs. The idea of having a topic sentence to start a paragraph seems to be alien to many and hence the organisation of their writing suffers. Limited vocabulary and weak expression were noted in many instances with unidiomatic use of language and direct translations from candidates' first language being evident. Similarly, grammar and punctuation were not up to scratch in many instances. The narrative tenses proved to be challenging in the short stories with candidates failing to distinguish between the past simple and perfect tenses. Subject-verb agreement was often incorrect and punctuation errors abounded with a total disregard for the comma being the most common. Marks were often lost for spelling of both high and low frequency words. This, as well as not adhering to the word limit stipulated in the rubric, cost scores of candidates marks.

General comments

Writing accurately and fluently with a particular purpose and audience in mind is assessed in this component. In general, those candidates who fared well demonstrated an ability to consider the wording of the title carefully. This, in turn, allowed them to plan and organise their writing into clear, cohesive and coherent paragraphs.

Paper 2 Question 2: Reading and Writing (60 marks)

Weighted at 30%, this component assesses reading and writing skills by means of reading comprehension, a summary and a short writing task.

Both papers included texts which were comparable in length and difficulty and dealt with different topics. These were followed by questions which tested the candidates' ability to read for gist and for detail, to infer meaning and to work out the meaning of vocabulary items in context. In addition, candidates were required to summarise and show evidence of their recognition of the writer's intention. This was done through questions which varied from multiple choice, inference and short-answer questions, marking statements true or false and providing a reason as well as questions requiring candidates to locate information in the text.

A read-and-respond task was set with Paper A candidates being required to write an email to a friend with a word count of between 60 and 80 words; Paper B candidates were asked to write a contribution of between 50 and 60 words for their school magazine.

Performance

Question 2: Reading and Writing in Paper A

Passage 1

Question 1 tested the candidates' ability to read for gist and the majority selected the correct answer showing a clear recognition of the focus of the text.

Question 2 required candidates to give two reasons to show that the River Thames is overlooked. While most candidates answered correctly, marks were lost when answers were too general and failed to include the idea of walking over the river.

In question 3, candidates were asked to explain two phrases from the text and generally did so correctly. However, instances of answers copied from the text or which were irrelevant were noted and penalised accordingly.

In question 4, most candidates were able to infer meaning and provide the reason why osprey sightings were a sign that the river was thriving once again. Marks were lost for answers which made a vague reference to the absence of pollution.

Question 5 mostly yielded correct answers with candidates mentioning the improvement of sewage treatment in their responses.

Question 6 required candidates to explain a phrase in their own words and this proved challenging with many only focussing on one word in the phrase and ignoring the rest.

Question 7 focussed on the comparison made in the text between the River Thames and the River Amazon by means of a two-part question. Candidates struggled with both parts and incomplete answers abounded. Many failed to offer an explanation of the word *embrace* and lost marks.

Question 8 posed few problems and answers were mostly correct.

In question 9, providing the two reasons required was manageable for most candidates.

Question 10 required candidates to explain the references being made by the referents given. While there were no issues with (a) and (b), the same cannot be said for (c) and (d). The most common incorrect answer in (c) was *public awareness* while in (d) many evidently had an issue with recognising the possessive.

Question 11 sought to check the candidates' understanding of two phrases used in the text by working out meaning at paragraph level. A good number of them failed to make the link to the river referred to in the paragraph while others who were completely off the mark thought that this referred to a parking space for the disabled or to a rural area.

Question 12 required candidates to summarise the work carried out by volunteers in a paragraph of between 40 and 50 words. Those who fared well started the summary with a topic sentence and included the correct information which was well-paraphrased, while making effective use of linkers and accurate spelling. Instances of going over the stipulated word count were noted and penalised.

Question 13 assessed the candidates' ability to explain an expression in their own words. Here, incomplete answers abounded, mainly due to the fact that there was no reference to the work that had been accomplished.

Question 14 was answered correctly by most candidates.

Passage 2

Question 1 required candidates to lift information from the text and most answers were correct.

In question 2, candidates were asked for two reasons as evidence of the writer's tension. Although many of the answers given were correct, those who failed to make reference to the nervous laughs or to the fact that the writer was hovering anxiously, lost marks.

Question 3 presented candidates with five statements to mark True or False and to provide a reason in order to demonstrate their understanding of the specific information in the text. The third statement, (c), proved to be a stumbling block with many candidates merely repeating the statement and making no reference to the investigation.

Question 4 required candidates to scan a number of lines in the text in order to find synonyms for the six words given. Marks were lost mostly in (c) when candidates failed to identify the correct word *swatted* and gave *wandered* or *pushed* instead.

Question 5 posed some difficulty to candidates who were unable to paraphrase in their explanation and a tendency to copy words from the text was noted.

In question 6, candidates gave mostly correct answers when identifying the two problems about captive tigers. Marks were lost by those candidates who focussed on the poor conditions the tigers were kept in rather than on the federal law or the number of tigers being unknown.

Question 7 required candidates to mention two dangers posed by roadside zoos and many did so correctly. Incorrect answers were those which made no reference to the dangers posed to either humans or animals but only to the fact that tigers are kept in small cages.

In their response to question 8, candidates referred mostly to both trainers in their comparison, however, there were instances of vague answers which cost them marks. At times, no attempt to compare the two was made.

In question 9, a satisfactory number of candidates were able to hone in on the meaning of *ran the gamut*. Marks were lost by candidates who failed to define the meaning of this expression and who gave one-sided answers such as that the cats were ill-treated.

Question 10 yielded mostly correct answers when candidates provided the full sentence they were required to quote.

In question 11, mostly correct answers were given.

The first part of question 12 proved unproblematic for candidates unlike the second part which cost candidates marks mostly due to the fact that the reasons were not both included in the answer.

Writing task

The short writing task required candidates to write an email to a friend to dissuade them from buying a tiger as a pet. Candidates who fared well produced fluent writing which focussed on the task and made use of idiomatic expression and the appropriate register. However, marks were lost for unwieldy sentence construction, spelling errors and subject-verb agreement as well as for lifting information from the text.

Some emails were written in an overly formal tone and many went beyond the word limit which cost the candidates marks.

Question 2: Reading and Writing in Paper B

Passage 1

Question 1, intended to test candidates' ability to understand the gist of the text by underlining the most appropriate title. Many chose correctly, however, instances of candidates opting for title (c) were noted.

Question 2 required candidates to locate specific information in the text and the majority were able to do this.

In question 3, candidates were required to explain two phrases taken from the text and while there were many correct answers, a good number failed to show their understanding of the meaning of replicated in (a). Answers such as *seen all over China* and *common across China* cost these candidates marks. The second phrase proved to be more of a challenge for most since the phrase *has its roots* was generally explained as *in the past or a long time ago*.

Question 4 required candidates to locate four phrases used to refer to old people. Most were successful in doing this and those who lost marks did so for writing one-word answers or sentences instead of phrases.

Similarly, question 5 was not problematic with most candidates identifying the four facts required. Here marks were lost for incomplete answers.

In question 6, candidates were asked to mark three statements true or false as well as to provide a suitable reason to demonstrate their understanding of the specific information in the text. While marking the statements was not an issue, candidates did struggle somewhat when it came to providing a reason. This was evident in the last statement where many failed to understand the phrase *pitched the idea* and gave *wants his local city park to look like China's* as a reason.

Question 7 asked candidates to locate two different types of equipment in the text and to explain the benefits of each. Incomplete answers abounded here with many giving only the name of the equipment and not the benefits.

Question 8 required candidates to identify two facts and the majority fared well. Marks were lost, however, when candidates gave answers such as *label on how to use it* or *15 minutes from the bus stop* instead of the correct *close to roads and public transport*.

Question 9 was set to assess candidates' ability to summarise the reasons why senior playgrounds in Malaga are underused. While many were able to locate the correct information, explaining it in a coherent manner and adhering to the word limit, proved challenging for a great deal of candidates.

In question 10, most candidates were able to identify at least one of the two ways in which senior parks are a low-cost investment. Those who lost marks gave incomplete answers such as when *adults are healthy* or *less money has to be spent on healthcare*.

Question 11 tested candidates' ability to understand the gist of each paragraph by matching each one with their corresponding caption. Many fared well in (1) and (4) but lost marks in (2) and (3).

Passage 2

Question 1 required candidates to mention two facts about Shikoku. While many fared well, some lost marks since they gave facts about the narrator instead or because the facts about Shikoku were incorrect.

In question 2, candidates were required to infer meaning and this proved challenging with most evidently failing to grasp the meaning of *seemingly* in answers such as *the city looked deserted because only scarecrows lived there*.

Question 3 tested the candidates' ability to locate the physical features of the scarecrows in a given set of lines in the text. Marks were lost for answers which described what the scarecrows were wearing rather than their physical features. Nonetheless, a good number of candidates fared well here.

As did question 2, question 4 assessed the candidates' ability to infer meaning. Once again, very few candidates could be awarded full marks here. Although many showed understanding of the way the narrator felt, explaining the phrase proved to be a stumbling block. Common answers for which marks were lost include *he was imagining* and *he was confused*.

In question 5, candidates were required to give a reason why the writer stopped abruptly and it did not prove to be too difficult with many being awarded the full mark.

Question 6 required candidates to scan read a given number of lines in order to find synonyms for the eight words provided. Marks were lost mainly for incorrect answers in (e), (d), (f) and (h) as well as for switching the answers for (f) and (h).

In questions 7 and 8, candidates were asked to explain the character's actions while in question 9, the scarecrows' position. The majority found no difficulty with these three questions. Marks were lost in question 8 for answers which explained that Ayano filled the school with scarecrows *to remember the people who passed away*.

Question 10 required candidates to explain a phrase in their own words which proved difficult since many focussed on the situation only and failed to mention that the writer was attracted to Ayano's warmth, thus missing the point.

Question 11 focussed on the referents in the text. Many lost marks for incorrect answers in (b) and (g) for omitting to show the possessive and in (e) for giving the people who passed away instead of the villagers.

Question 12 required candidates to infer meaning from a phrase in the first part and give a reason for their answer in the second part. Both questions posed little difficulty and many candidates fared well here.

Question 13 focussed on identifying the purpose of the passage by underlining the correct answer and many candidates did so correctly.

Writing task

The read-and-respond task required candidates to write about their happiest memory at school to be published on the school magazine. Those who fared well produced clear, relevant pieces written using language which was appropriate and in the correct tone. Scores were low, however, when candidates struggled with relevance, accuracy and went over the word limit. Instances of candidates not attempting this task were also noted.

C. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This year, candidates were assessed on their performance in language use, writing and reading and therefore, the concluding comments are based on these components.

Candidates' performance in the reading component was fairly good although more emphasis on the skills of inference and deduction is required. After marking 1101 scripts, however, the examiners observed that the use of accurate and fluent English at this level needs improvement. This was amply evident in the language use and writing components of the paper which were characterised by lack of idiomatic expression, poor grammar and weak syntax. Besides exposing candidates to the language as much as possible, more effort is required from an early age to engage candidates in meaningful writing tasks with a clear purpose and audience in order to raise their level of competence.

In conclusion, it is worth pointing out that importance should be given to all four skills ie. listening, speaking, reading and writing for full competence in the language to be reached.

Chairperson

Examination Panel 2020