GCSE

English

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J350**

OCR Report to Centres

June 2013

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This report on the examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the specification content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the examination.

OCR will not enter into any discussion or correspondence in connection with this report.

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General Certificate of Secondary Education

English (J350)

OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

A641 Reading Literary Texts

General comments

In this session, centres continued to take up the option to use themed tasks, mainly with a set text such as *Of Mice and Men*, *Romeo and Juliet* or Owen, but sometimes with texts of their own choice such as *Macbeth* and *Opening Worlds.*

There were a few centres which had entered text combinations that are not allowed; where this was the case, it was usually of Steinbeck with either Duffy or Zephaniah. Centres must be clear that the requirement is to select **one** text from Different Cultures/Contemporary and **one** from Literary Heritage and these must be taken from the poetry and prose and **not** Shakespeare. Choosing *Of Mice and Men, Tsotsi, Notes from a Small Island* or *The Kindness of Strangers* means that the poetry must be Owen unless the centre opts for the themed task with their own choice of Literary Heritage poet; choosing to enter for Duffy or Zephaniah would require the set prose text to be either *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Withered Arm and Other Wessex Tales.*

Centres are clearly much more familiar with the administration of controlled conditions and the only request made by moderators was for work to be stapled rather than being sent in separate plastic wallets.

Candidates were well prepared, and the quality of the responses was generally consistent across all three genres. In some folders, there was, however, evidence of development of skills over time. The best candidates had a full and clear engagement with the works, gave well-chosen references with good analysis and evaluation, using relevant contextual elements to develop and illustrate the writers', and their own, ideas. The candidate's own personal approach and engagement to the texts and the questions is to be encouraged and where notes were included with the work, these were very helpful in seeing how the final task had been produced.

The ability to explore the effects of language, especially in poetry essays, as opposed to either explaining the meaning or giving a general statement such as "This makes the reader feel sympathy" or "This shows that Owen was bitter about war" gives evidence of the candidate appreciating how language works and often signals a move into band 4. Below this level, candidates often resorted to narrative and straightforward explanation of the meaning of quotations and this generally indicates performance at band 5 and below.

In awarding band 3 and above, the focus on the writer needs to go beyond merely naming him/her and must show an awareness of the writer's intentions, closely supported by an analysis of the techniques employed and their effects, becoming more perceptive and sophisticated for bands 1 and 2. There was still some tendency for centres to refer to "analysis" in relation to anything in the responses that involved language and close reading. The phrase from the band 3 criteria of "secure critical response" was sometimes used where writing sounded confident or assured, rather than in response to language.

As was evident in January, the social and historical context of texts was addressed more effectively than in the first year of this specification and there was less of a tendency to begin with the seemingly obligatory biography of the writer or the conditions at the time of writing. A useful area for development in future sessions is for centres to focus on key words in the questions, notably "**How", "ways in which"** and "**How far",** as these encourage an analytical rather than descriptive response.

Question specific comments

THEMED TASKS

How does the writer make the setting important in a text you have studied?

In exploring *Of Mice and Men,* many candidates described the setting(s) and talked about loneliness, The American Dream and the Depression period, as well as the male-orientated culture of life on the ranch. Higher level responses appreciated the impact of these "settings" on the lives of characters and the novel overall.

Responses to Owen either referred to the natural world setting, making them very similar to the set task, or explored more broadly the WW1 setting to the poems and the ways in which Owen describes the front line and its effects on the soldiers. The best responses moved beyond simply explaining the setting and analysed how it is made important to the text, with some good studies of its social/ symbolic aspects; however, for some candidates, the term "setting" was not clearly understood and they simply wrote about characters' situations and what they said and did.

Explore how the writer shows the unappealing side of human nature in a text you have studied.

Various types of undesirable or unappealing behaviours were discussed and evaluated and arranged in some sort of rank order, with appropriate support. Higher level responses were well referenced whereas less developed ones were more generalised and less precise.

Whilst this task was mainly used for *Of Mice and Men,* with some effective evaluation of specific characters, often related effectively to the harshness of ranch life, it also prompted responses to the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen". In general, candidates were very able to identify unappealing characters in a text, describe them and illustrate how they had unappealing sides. "How" was often left unaddressed - even, worryingly, by otherwise more highly attaining candidates.

PROSE OR LITERARY NON-FICTION

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

"Maybe ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other." Starting with the first encounter between Curley, George and Lennie in Section 2, explore how far Steinbeck persuades you to agree with Slim's comment.

This set task was often not as popular as the themed ones on Steinbeck, showing centres benefiting from the choice available. There were some secure responses which evaluated different types of fear, for example of bullying, discrimination, insecurity, etc., with appropriate support. The initial episode referred to in the question provides the opportunity for close analysis of the fear and tension created, which sets the tone for George and Lennie's experiences on the ranch.

The very best responses used the prompt of "How far" to enable candidates to think about relationships which do not demonstrate the same level of fear and aggression, such as that of George and Lennie, although it may be argued that at times Lennie is fearful of George's reaction. Responses drew effectively on the social context, referring to the impact of the isolation, harshness of ranch life and destruction of dreams on the characters and their relationships.

Tsotsi by Athol Fugard

Starting with Chapter 6, explore how Fugard builds up a sense of fear and tension in the novel.

It was disappointing to see that only a very few candidates opted to answer on this text this session, however those that did responded effectively to the language and made effective analysis of Chapter 6 and their own choice of other key moments.

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

How does Austen show the importance of social status to one or two characters in the novel?

The candidates who responded to this text clearly enjoyed exploring characters such as Lady Catherine, Mr Collins, Darcy and the Bingley sisters, recognising how the importance of social status not only affected the ways in which these characters behaved – making them an object of ridicule in some cases – but how they impacted on the lives of others.
The Withered Arm and other Wessex Tales by Thomas Hardy

How does Hardy encourage you to feel sympathy for one or two characters in this selection of stories?

The title story from this collection and *The Son's Veto* proved to be the usual choices for the responses made to Hardy and candidates clearly engaged with characters' situations and their often unfair treatment at the hands of others. The impact of social context was used effectively to develop reasons for feeling sympathy.

Notes from a Small Island by Bill Bryson

How does Bryson reveal his attitude to some of the tourist attractions and heritage sites he visits?

Candidates who chose this text showed appreciation of the ways in which Bryson's attitude is revealed, engaging with the humour and the language used through some apt selection of key moments.

The Kindness of Strangers by Kate Adie

There were no responses to Adie in this series.

DRAMA: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Romeo and Juliet

How does Shakespeare show the importance of anger to the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*?

There was some effective exploration of different characters, most notably Tybalt and Lord Capulet, the violence and aggression created by the feud and – in the higher band responses – appreciation not only of how these contribute to the tragedy but to the tone of the play through the language and structure. Lower band responses tended to be rather characterised by a more mechanical description of who is angry and why, starting with the thumb biting at the beginning and working through the play with references used in a simple way to support what is said and done; the capacity to provide an overview characterised stronger responses.

The background of the feud and the context of the play were often used well to show the impact of anger, but the" importance to the tragedy" proved to be more challenging. Surprisingly, not one candidate wrote about the death of Paris at the hands of Romeo in the Capulet crypt. The best responses engaged closely with the drama showing a clear understanding of the impact of stage directions.

Julius Caesar

How far does Shakespeare encourage you to admire Brutus?

There were a few responses to Brutus which were well developed, taking the opportunity to provide a balanced argument carefully supported with textual evidence. The social and literary context informed these essays, with understanding of the importance of honour and reputation as well as the nature of tragedy.

The prompt "How far" enabled the strongest responses to interpret and appreciate how Shakespeare encourages them to see some complexity in the presentation of Brutus.

POETRY: SELECTED POEMS

Wilfred Owen

Explore some of the ways in which Owen presents the natural world in his poems.

This question prompted some thoughtful evaluation of the language and the ways in which the natural world is used by Owen to explore the impact of war on the soldiers. For many candidates this was their best response and they were able to engage with the language, poetic techniques, and support with close reference to the language. It was a pleasure to see most candidates show understanding of the devices rather than just listing them and the social, cultural and historical strand was more easily embedded in responses here.
Benjamin Zephaniah

How does Zephaniah show his feelings towards powerful British institutions in his poems?

Candidates showed some engagement with the tone adopted by Zephaniah and the language used to create it, with *Chant of a Homesick Nigga, Three Black Males* and *Biko the Greatness* being, as in January, popular choices. Candidates clearly appreciate the opportunity to discuss the social context and the injustice evident through the poetry, however it was too easy for some weaker candidates to go off task and rant about Zephaniah's criticism of racism.
Carol Ann Duffy

Explore some of the ways in which Duffy challenges stereotypical views of women in her poems.

As with Zephaniah, the responses submitted tended to be ones where the centre had broken the rubric for the combination of texts and lower band essays tended to be caught up in a rant about stereotypical views of women and be less focussed on the language ("ways in which"). The best, however, showed qualities of interpretation and analysis of language.

A642 Imaginative Writing

General Comments

Once more centres are to be congratulated for their careful preparation of candidates for this session. Almost all centres presented their folders clearly and submitted their samples promptly. Centres should use tags or staples to attach work together rather than plastic envelopes or cardboard folders as this slows the moderation process.

The best centres provided clear summative comments on the cover sheet which weighed each candidate's strengths and weaknesses carefully in individualised comments which drew on the assessment criteria but did not slavishly reproduce them. It further helped moderators to understand centres' award of particular marks when there was annotation on the body of each piece of work which drew attention to specific examples of the candidate's qualities.

Centres must give a clear breakdown on the cover sheet of the marks awarded for A03i and ii on the one hand and AO3iii on the other. The indication of errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar in the body of the text also supports the moderator in understanding the AO3iii mark awarded. Where there was disagreement about the marks awarded it was often about the mark awarded for these technical features of writing.

<u>The Tasks</u>

There were examples seen by the moderators of candidates attempting all the tasks with equal success. In some cases, however, the response to the satellite task was much shorter and much less successful. Each piece is marked separately and the two marks averaged to arrive at the final mark so centres should consider ways in which to help candidates achieve equal success in both pieces.

In this session some centres submitted invalid tasks which were from the previous year or which were assigned for the parallel unit in A651 GCSE English Language. Centres are urged to make sure that they are submitting the correct tasks for the correct year and the correct specification. They are reminded that they can refer to the Controlled Assessment Consultancy if they are in any doubt.

Media

Write a script for a broadcast which explores how a group of young people is affected by a particular problem.

Candidates responded imaginatively to this task, covering a wide range of problems such as gangs, drugs and bullying. Most responded by using the talk show format but some produced successful documentaries or dramas. The best were able to develop their ideas in some detail and capture the form and style of such broadcasts effectively. Some produced disjointed pieces where the conversation seemed stilted and where the piece as a whole lacked a clear structure.

Write a letter to the producers commenting on the broadcast and giving your own views.

Once again the letter format helped candidates to organise their ideas clearly. It also gave them an opportunity to adopt a formal style in contrast to the conversational style often used in the broadcast piece. There were fewer candidates than in previous sessions who repeated material from the core piece and many took the opportunity to explore an alternative point of view.

Write a monologue in prose or poetry exploring your thoughts and feelings about the problem explored in the broadcast.

This was also a popular alternative which was often successful. Candidates tended to rely less on the original broadcast and present instead an account of a particular person's experience creating voices that were often vivid and engaging. For some candidates there was a little uncertainty about how to organise their ideas and the endings of these pieces were often the least successful part. Where candidates attempted poetry there were some successes but many would have benefited from clearer guidance on how to structure their ideas more effectively.

Write the words of a leaflet offering advice to young people on an issue that affects their lives.

This was less popular than the other two tasks but there were some successful responses. In the best examples candidates concentrated more on the wording of the leaflet and less on its layout. Too many candidates, however, presented texts which used images and presentation to some effect but had fairly straightforward and uninspiring text.

<u>Text Development</u>

Imagine one or two characters from a text you have read, heard or seen find themselves in a different setting. Write about what happens.

Although George and Lennie are still the most popular choices of characters for this task it is encouraging to see many centres using a wider range of choices of characters. In some cases it is clear that a particular class have based their work on watching the same film whereas in others each candidate has made their own individual choices.

A key challenge, especially when candidates are using texts that may be unfamiliar to the moderator, is to establish the characters within the piece itself rather than relying on the reader's prior knowledge. It is pleasing to report that more and more candidates are rising to this challenge and creating pieces of work that can be read independently.

Write the words of a radio advert to persuade people to visit the setting you have described in your story.

This was the least popular of the satellite tasks but was usually completed successfully by those who attempted it. Writing to persuade allowed candidates to use the many techniques they had learned to advertise the setting effectively. Although these pieces were often quite short they usually included sufficient detail and demonstrated sufficient skill to achieve a standard similar to the core task.

Imagine you visit the setting you have used in your story. Write a detailed description of this setting, either in prose or poetry, expressing your thoughts and feelings about it.

In most cases this was the satellite task of choice. Candidates approached the description imaginatively and were able to use adventurous vocabulary and imagery to present the setting successfully. Not all addressed the second part of the question by expressing their thoughts and feelings about it but the best managed to incorporate this aspect implicitly by their careful choice of language.

Write a feature article for a newspaper or magazine set after the events of your story in which someone is interviewed about what happened. The interviewee may or may not be a character from your story.

This was also less popular than the description but was often very effective. There was some tendency in weaker answers simply to repeat the material from the core task with little adaptation to newspaper style or format. These answers often retold the story quite well but did not always engage with the main part of the task which was the interview with a character. The newspaper format was quite supportive and it was pleasing to see that few candidates were distracted from writing a substantial text by a desire to make their piece look like a newspaper.

<u>Overall</u>

The work of most candidates was well presented and mainly accurate but illegible work sometimes made moderation difficult. Where candidates have handwriting that is hard to read, centres are reminded that no special permission is required to use a word processor to complete the work as long as electronic aids such as thesauruses are switched off.

Although a range of accuracy is expected according to candidates' levels of attainment there were persistent errors in even the most able candidates' work. The most common errors are in punctuation, particularly the use of the comma splice between questions and the punctuation of speech. There also seems to be some carelessness about the accurate use of capital letters.

Overall moderators reported enjoyment of the imaginative ways in which most candidates, at all levels of ability, engaged with these tasks. Centres had clearly worked hard to inspire an individual approach to the tasks and were less prone to scaffold the work. The very best pieces, according to the moderators, were always genuinely engaging and sometimes quite astonishing for candidates who in the main, are in the last year of secondary schooling.

A643 Speaking and Listening

General Comments

The entry for both units was large, with many centres choosing to use Speaking and Listening to satisfy the Terminal Rule. The Terminal Rule currently allows centres to use any of the Controlled Assessment units for final assessment, so centres, which had deferred entry for the January series, submitted work to be assessed for this series.

For this series, responding to feedback from centres, as with January 2013, one moderator was responsible for all three components: A643/A652 Section A and A652 Section B, to reduce the number of separate moderators, with whom centres had to deal.

The Training and Guidance filmed footage, to support centres this academic year, was issued online to enable all teachers preparing candidates, to access the material for assessment purposes, task setting and administration. As with the two previously issued DVDs, there was a complete range of activities across all three contexts, but which gave specific support to the "real-life" context and task setting for the drama-focussed context. These two areas were identified as being problematic for some centres.

Advisory visits to centres have been profitable, with centres responding to the requirement, in the main, in a positive and professional manner, working happily with the criteria and acting upon the advice given.

Task setting

Centres are experienced in task setting to cover the requirements of the three different contexts. It was clear that some departments and individual teachers had put a great deal of thought into designing tasks, which would allow achievement across the ability range, and into providing opportunities for candidates to succeed.

Task setting is crucial in determining successful outcomes for this component, and centres are always advised to set tasks, which allow the assessment criteria to be met, and are engaging and relevant for the candidates. However centres must be made aware of the fact that some tasks can be limiting, by their very nature.

Giving candidates the freedom to choose for example the subject matter of a presentation for the Individual Extended Contribution, without guidance may lead to underperformance. So using examples from this series, a presentation on "Girl Guiding and whether gender specific organisations are still appropriate in this day of equality" allows achievement in the higher bands; a talk on "My favourite horse" is less likely to do so.

However more worryingly, the requirement of the "real-life context in and beyond the classroom" is still proving problematic for some centres, despite being now well into the life of this specification. The repeated advice to centres is that it is not just a matter of subject matter, but rather it is a question of purpose and audience, which extends the performance "beyond the classroom". So a talk per se, regardless of the subject matter does not meet this requirement. It does not alter the validity by calling it "a formal talk" or "a conference talk", if the presentation is still to the rest of the class and if they are not in any other role other than themselves.

So a talk on work experience is no different to one on fishing; both are straightforward talks to the rest of the class. Similarly, deciding, "Who is to blame for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet?" set in a mock court scene, with candidates in role as characters from the play cannot be classed as "real-life".

However, there are many centres which have embraced the "real-life" context with enthusiasm and likewise their candidates, seeing it as an opportunity to extend and demonstrate their skills.

Similarly problematic for some centres is the drama-focussed context. Increasingly centres seem to assume that drama-focussed means that the stimulus material must be drama text based. Speaking and Listening requirements seem to get confused with those for Drama as a separate subject. So techniques appropriate to Drama, freeze frames and the like are not appropriate for this component, where the emphasis is always on Speaking and Listening.

Too close a link with a drama text does not always allow candidates to create and develop independent characters of their own. Performing a scene verbatim from a play, usually the set Shakespeare play, without any adaptation, does not allow candidates the opportunity to meet the assessment criteria.

The extra scene or speech is often a popular valid activity, but care must be taken not to stretch the bounds of credibility or set inappropriate tasks, which do not allow candidates to achieve their potential. Hot seating Lennie from "Of Mice and Men" would be one such task, with limited verbal responses possible.

Reference has been made to the support available as regards task setting for all aspects of Speaking and Listening. The tasks illustrated on DVD and the online filmed footage are all valid and to be used together with the commentaries and a guidance document available on the OCR website, specifically for the "real-life" context. The Controlled Assessment Consultancy is always available to centres seeking further advice on individual tasks and through this a centre's tasks may be validated. Centres with previous entries will have had direct feedback regarding task setting and task setting is always a major aspect of Advisory visits by external moderators.

Record keeping

A key part of the process is record keeping. Centres are advised to maintain on-going records for all candidates, perhaps making use of a centrally-held database of marks for candidates, with written comments. These procedures represent good practice in centres and help to prevent problems arising from staff absences or changes of staff. They also help in the selection of the final three activities to be used to form the basis for assessment. Good practice continues to be multiple opportunities, with the final selection being on an individual basis.

Many centres have their own working records, which contain feedback to candidates and candidate involvement in the process. Final submission for assessment is then on the OCR Controlled Assessment form for Speaking and Listening, which covers all the necessary elements, required by the external moderator.

Centres must remember that candidates' record sheets form a vital piece of evidence in the moderation process. If there is a lack of detail in the description of activities or when comments on performance have been "lifted" directly from the band descriptors with little or no linkage to individual candidate achievement, then it is extremely difficult to carry out the moderation of a centre.

Worryingly some centres came close to having records returned to be re-submitted with the necessary range and detail of comment. Typical lack of detail in description would be "a talk to the class" or "a group discussion on the poetry" or "court scene "Romeo and Juliet"". The level of challenge or complexity involved cannot be judged without the specific subject matter, or in the case of the drama-focussed context, the role adopted and developed.
Similarly bland, generalised comments regarding performance, where it is impossible to distinguish one candidate's performance from another's, or which band descriptors are being employed, are unsatisfactory.

It is important that all the teachers preparing and assessing candidates, adopt a common approach to filling in the record sheets and that good practice is enforced throughout a centre. There was often great variation within a centre, with some providing detailed, helpful and pertinent comments on candidates, and some whose forms were at best perfunctory.

It is a centre's responsibility to ensure that external moderators are supplied with a comprehensive set of records, with all sections completed and marks/arithmetic checked to eliminate mathematical and transcription errors.

Thankfully the majority of centres provided all the necessary information, with well-presented records, increasingly word-processed in part and as a whole.

The Application of the Criteria

The starting point for this must be achievement as set against the performance criteria, fixing first on a band and then secondly the mark within the band range. Comments on achievement on candidates' records should make reference to the band descriptors and give a mark out of 40 for each separate context.

Worryingly it was noted that not all centres or individual teachers within centres matched band descriptors used to the marks awarded. There were discrepancies with teachers not seeming to describe performance accurately. Good practice in awarding marks balances strengths and weaknesses, not just rewarding strengths. An explanation is given, for example as to why a candidate failed to achieve the next band when on a borderline. This aspect of the application of the criteria is particularly important, where there is bunching of marks, to distinguish separate performances.

The final mark is based on a simple mathematical calculation; the three separate marks are totalled and divided by three. Centres are advised to check the final calculations carefully as some mistakes were discovered by moderators.

Importantly no assumption should be made as to a link between bands/marks and grades.

Internal Standardisation Procedures

The majority of centres continue to have secure, often very rigorous procedures in place to ensure internal standardisation of the marks. Good practice is to use cross moderation/marking exercises across groups, reorganisation of groups for assessment and department marking often using centre filmed material, together with using the filmed assessment evidence provided annually by OCR.

Centres are reminded that it is essential that all staff preparing and assessing candidates watch and discuss the filmed assessments. Signing the GCW330 form testifies to this having taken place.

However it was apparent that this had not taken place in all centres. The internally set standard must be confirmed against OCR's Agreed Standard. This is done by assessing and comparing the marks awarded by OCR for the filmed assessments, with the centre's marks, irrespective of centre size. The centre must then adjust its standard where necessary. Centre visits by an external moderator further confirm a centre's marking.

Worryingly, even though some centres indicate that they have watched the DVDs/filmed footage, they still get the "real-life" context wrong. Also centres are warned against using out of date, old material from previous specifications. Some centres refer to material on video cassette but all material for this specification has been issued on DVD or as online footage.

Standardisation procedures should cover assessment, task setting (not necessarily the same tasks across all groups, but all candidates meeting all the requirements) and record keeping.

Administration

Unfortunately the administration for this unit seems to be becoming worse every subsequent series. Centres which were always reliable and efficient have become much less so, seemingly bewildered by procedures, sampling arrangements and the relevant documentation. Moderators have reported centres being weeks late in sending all the relevant material, with no explanation. In some instances, thankfully a small number, but there should not be any, moderators have received negative reactions, when legitimately asking for moderation material. It is essential that centres familiarise themselves with the deadline dates and procedures pertinent to this unit. It is in the interests of all parties that deadlines are met, and that candidates' results are not put in jeopardy.

To streamline procedures, as stated previously, one moderator rather than three dealt with a centre, but some centres confused the different sampling arrangements for Spoken Language and those for Speaking and Listening. The Spoken Language sample is selected by OCR and an e-mail request is sent to centres. For Speaking and Listening only, the sample is selected by the centre as indicated in the specification.

However even though one moderator is involved, centres should keep the three components separate: A643, A652 Speaking and Listening and A652 Spoken Language. The moderation material should be presented in an easily identifiable form. Much time-consuming work was involved separating forms and documentation before moderation could take place.

To summarise, Instructions to Centres on Moderation are available on the OCR website, as are all relevant forms, hard copies are sent into centres, and administration procedures also form a section on the online filmed footage 2012-13 and on both previous DVDs.

As centres increasingly move to systems where non-specialist examinations officers are the point of reference and dispatchers of moderation material, it is vital for the smooth running of the process that instructions regarding procedures are read, understood and carried out by all relevant parties. Examinations officers need the support of Heads of English or their deputies in all this.

Conclusion

In conclusion it cannot be stressed enough that centres should make use of all the support material readily available for this unit, mention of which has been made previously, but to summarise:

- DVDs with commentaries and guidance, issued 2010 and 2011
- Online filmed material with accompanying commentary and guidance; 2012-13 and the new 2013-14 material issued at the beginning of the academic year
- Specific "real-life" context guidance
- The Consultancy Service for Speaking and Listening
- Advisory visits with centre specific feedback
- Reports to centres on the examination series, both centre specific and the Principal Moderators' general Report to Centres

The Speaking and Listening component has always been a real strength for candidates, as witnessed by moderators making Advisory visits to centres. There is a great deal of good work being done by candidates and this is testimony to the hard work and dedication of the teachers involved in preparing and assessing candidates. Many thanks as always for your continuing commitment.

A680.01 Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)

General Comments

The question paper proved to be accessible and of an appropriate level of demand for the tier. Candidates produced a range of responses to the reading material: an article on plastic pollution for Question 1 and a leaflet 'Welcome to our magical undersea world' for Question 2. Question 4 was the more popular of the two Writing questions.

The majority of candidates had obviously been well prepared for the examination and schools are increasingly familiar with the format of questions and booklet. The spaces provided for responses were sufficient for all but a minority of candidates, who made use of either the additional pages at the end of the booklet or separate pages attached to the booklet. It was pleasing to see that fewer candidates are using extra pages to respond to Question 2(a). However, there are still excessively long Writing responses, which often start purposefully but failed to sustain the quality over the second, third, fourth and even fifth pages.

In most cases, candidates appeared to have followed the advice regarding time allocation; few responses showed evidence of running out of time.

Individual Questions

Section A – Reading

Some candidates mistakenly commented on headings and photographs in their answer to Q2(b), or used information and language points in Q2(a).

Question 1

1(a) – 1(c)

These easier questions provided a relatively gentle way in to the paper, though not all candidates scored all 6 marks. Question 1(c) proved to be the most difficult for some candidates, who tried to fit 'sea, oil platforms and land' on to the small line provided for the short correct answer 'land'.

1(d)

Stronger responses were clearly focused on the task and expressed many of the points made in their own words. These candidates showed a secure understanding of the text's content, and used a range of valid points. As in previous sessions, less successful responses were often marked by the presence of one or more of the following:

- points made that were not relevant to the task
- points made at excessive length
- points repeated.

The points most frequently repeated related to creatures feeding on the plastic and as a consequence dying. There was a tendency to copy the three points made in the text's final paragraph. Responses in which these points were expressed largely in candidates' own words were generally located in the higher bands.

Some Band 6 responses simply altered occasional words or inverted the sentence structure in the quest for 'own words' – but such approaches tended to work mechanically through the passage, lifting too much of the material. The weakest answers lifted material indiscriminately and showed an almost complete misunderstanding of the task. There were instances of candidates who started by addressing the question but proceeded to give personal views about the topic and even exhortations, unfortunately misplaced, to clean up beaches.

Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. There were fewer candidates this session who had recourse to an extra sheet for Q2(a).

2(a)
Stronger responses always identified specific words or phrases in headings or specific features of photographs or the logo used in the leaflet. The following were some of the features in headings that candidates commented on: the direct address in the title; the superlatives in 'Britain's biggest sharks' and 'longest aquatunnels'; the pun in 'oceans of fun!; and the rhyme in 'Don't stand in line - book online'. The strongest responses commented on precise effects created by the use of such words and phrases whereas less successful responses tended to make general comments.

The impact of the logo and the different pictures of children and animals were addressed most successfully where candidates identified specific features and made thoughtful comments about the effects created for a reader of this particular leaflet.

Less confident responses tended to make general points about the colourfulness of the pictures and font of the main heading, with vague comments such as 'The colourful pictures draw the reader in' or 'make you feel as if you are there' or 'make you want to go there'. There was also occasionally overly general comment about the purpose of sub-headings ('they tell you what is in the next section').

As ever for this question, selection of some relevant points together with pertinent analytical comment is sufficient to gain all 6 marks for this question. Candidates spending too much time writing on Q2(a) risk under-performing in Q2(b).

2(b)
Successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to select and analyse relevant information points and specific words and phrases which are used to persuade readers that the Blue Planet Aquarium is an enjoyable place for families to visit. The strongest responses considered carefully those parts of the leaflet targeted at parents and those targeted at children. There was reference to the direct address to parents: 'Your children will have a magical time...'

Many candidates explored with at least some success the leaflet's effusive language: 'truly magical', 'amazing range', 'enchanting clown fish', 'spectacular underwater safari', 'teeming with so many fish'. Reference as made, too, to the effect of descriptions such as 'fibre-optic light show synchronised with relaxing chill-out music'.

The ability to consider the effects of language was a discriminator in this question. Less successful responses tended to make a few simple descriptive points about what the Aquarium offered or listed words or phrases from the leaflet without any critical comment.

As recommended in the January 2013 report, candidates would benefit from regular practice at answering Q2(b)-style questions, using both information **and** language points to address the question. They should be mindful that the best responses to language combine short quotation and concise analytical comment.

Section B – Writing

Questions 3 and 4

Examiners saw the full range of performance. Both questions produced writing of high quality that examiners enjoyed reading.

There were, however, too many instances of candidates writing at excessive length in their Writing responses. This was perhaps the result of unsuccessful time management: too little time spent on Section A and too much on Section B. As mentioned in previous reports, length of answer is not a criterion that ensures success. There is no need for candidates to write more than one-and-a-half to two sides of writing (using average size of handwriting as a guide). In this amount of writing they are able to provide more than adequate evidence of an ability to write in an engaging and organised manner. This session there were too many instances of writing which started promisingly but failed to sustain the quality through the whole answer.

The following extract from the January 2013 report remained true of performance in Section B in June 2013: *'stronger responses showed a clear control of the material, and offered an engaging opening, clear development of ideas and an effective ending. Careful consideration was given to choices of vocabulary and sentence structures, and the readers' need for clarity and accuracy was acknowledged. By contrast, less successful responses did not convey much evidence of crafting material for a reader. There was a lack of control of material and, at best, only straightforward development of ideas; sometimes responses had a perfunctory conclusion or ended in mid-air. In general, the greater the length of responses, the more rambling and repetitive they tended to become. The least successful responses contained a level of linguistic error that required examiners to re-read the material to try to make sense of it. Common problems with punctuation included confusion between upper and lower case letters, and a failure to mark sentence divisions.*'

Question 3

This question asked for a 'speech to your class' on the topic 'We must protect the planet for the future'. Stronger responses made it clear from the start that the writing was for a formal speech to their peer group, adapting the material to the requirements of this specific audience.
At the top end, careful arguments were developed with some skill, and with appropriate use of rhetorical devices for effect: questions, repetition, hyperbole and rule of three. Less successful responses tended to repeat the point that the planet must be protected for future generations, but with little detail about how this might be achieved. A minority of responses relied too heavily on the content of the 'Plastic pollution' passage. There was, on balance, less evidence in this session of the use of fanciful statistics.

Question 4

This was a more open-ended question asking for description of 'the place you most like to go to' and an explanation of 'why you like being there'. Stronger responses were able to offer engaging and convincing explanations whereas less successful responses focused mainly on descriptions, often very basic and undeveloped at the bottom of the range. Places included holidays abroad and in the UK, and places closer to home such as the local park, gym or even the candidate's bedroom. A number of candidates wrote about school, in almost wistful tones as the end of Year 11 approached.
Although no audience was specified in the question, the best responses showed a degree of crafting in the writing in a way that acknowledged the presence of a reader. Less successful responses tended to lose focus and control, becoming repetitive and requiring the reader to re-read the material before the meaning became clear.

A680.02 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments

Examiners reported that the paper had been very well received. The candidates engaged with both texts, readily appreciating the quirky humour. The subject matter proved very accessible and, as the BBC brings out a series on food poverty and children's lunchboxes are again under close scrutiny, the ideas presented to the candidates proved contemporary and relevant. Hardly any candidates omitted to offer a response to each question, certainly not struggling for something say but rather finding too much, in some cases. Examiners did note an increase in the length of answers this year and generally found that the extra quantity had proved unhelpful, even detrimental, across all questions.

All questions on this paper require clearly focused and purposeful writing and any answer that loses sight of the task, loses control or drifts to digression will not score highly. Candidates must also be advised to spend sufficient time on reading the questions and the texts very carefully before they start writing. There was frequent correlation between answers of excessive length and some misunderstanding of text or task.

There were very few instances of rubric error, although a few candidates did try to answer Q3 on the first text. Equally, there were very few instances of candidates entered for the wrong tier, although centres are urged to consider whether those candidates who struggle to get into Band 4 on their Reading questions might be better supported by Foundation tier entry.

QUESTION 1

Although this should be the most straightforward, fact-based question, the concise outline of key points remains the most disappointing. Moreover, failure to assemble relevant facts here seems to be to the detriment of a successful response to question 2. Some candidates are still failing to distinguish between the two tasks and delivered much prepared comment on language features here, in some instances failing to score marks as a result.

Examiners were pleased to note that in this question the problem of excessive length seems to be diminishing, but now the briefer answers seem to struggle to offer a good range of points. Candidates are still wasting a lot of words giving excess detail and elaboration. It was sufficient to simply identify action-packed TV commercials and web-based, multimedia marketing. Detailed descriptions of each (and quotation of the tweet) were not needed.

It is certainly worth reminding candidates that question 1 will require selection of relevant material; a significant number of candidates tried to summarise the whole article. One significant improvement was noted in that use of 'own words' has become more sensible, although one candidate did tell us that the marketing strategy which intended to appeal to our hearts was out to 'attract us in the cardio-vascular region'.

One potential problem emerging is that examiners saw an increase in the number of candidates offering their answer in the form of bullet points. School are reminded that the mechanical listing of points is a feature of answers below band 5 and that candidates are expected to show their understanding in a well-organised response, with synthesis of relevant points.

QUESTION 2

Having identified the facts about the 'Baby Carrots' campaign strategy in question one, the candidates were then asked to consider how the article presented the 'triumph' of the marketing success. Careful reading of both the text and the question was needed here and some inattentive readers did begin writing with the assumption that the article was somehow part of the campaign and that the writer's 'purpose' was to make us buy carrots.

More thoughtful answers picked up on the structure of the piece and looked at the unfolding success story; the 'before and after' illustrations of the carrot 'makeover'. The Baby Carrots' journey from the 'drawer of death' to their new 'grab-a-bag' status was effectively charted with plenty of good comment on word choice as the carrots moved from 'limp and slimy' associations to become a 'cheeky' and 'fun-loving' vegetable with 'personality'.

There was good attention to pace here with candidates noting the short sentence length in the description of the high-tech, action-packed advertisements. Use of information was handled very well this year with candidates not merely stating the writer uses 'facts to support' but actually exploring how those facts support the idea of success greater than government healthy eating initiatives and that sales went up even during a recession and with more expensive costs.

Careful readers also picked up on the writer's tone and pointed out that his general bewilderment at the strange linking of pterodactyls and carrots, and the bizarre idea that carrots are not a vegetable, emphasised both the creativity of the marketing and the extent to which the advertisers sought to manipulate consumer perceptions. The most able candidates offered incisive comment here.

As in previous sessions, the examiners reported that a considerable number of candidates still come to this examination wanting to off-load a quantity of prepared comment on devices and this is most unhelpful, as it is for question 3 also. The most successful answers will avoid the generic comment on headlines and pictures, making no more than a passing allusion to them as part of a more substantial text-based point. Empty comment on font, columns, positioning of images or colours in images cannot gain credit.

Candidates that can offer no more than description of features should not be taking the higher tier paper. However, examiners did also report that the vague assertions around 'wanting to read on' and 'relateability' are diminishing and this is to be encouraged.

QUESTION 3

Again this passage needed careful reading and thought before attempting to write a response. Inattentive readers who didn't move much beyond the opening section assumed the article was upholding the 'right to gorge' and omitted consideration of the more subtle points about extension of meaningful choice that were made later. A few candidates substituted their own personal thoughts on diet but these were fewer in number than in previous sessions.

Most candidates made a good attempt to explore the writer's tone and it was pleasing to see greater flexibility here. Whilst weaker students still confined themselves to assertions that the text was 'negative' and 'informal' most tried to connect language choice with content and did show quite secure understanding of how the writer was covering a serious topic in a deceptively light style. The conversational format was noted and generally explored with suitable examples, although examiners did report unhelpful use of an increasingly popular 'formula' point on the use of personal pronouns. It is not useful to simply quote 'I' or 'you' and then to assert a deep and meaningful bond has been formed.

However, there was awareness at most levels that the tone shifts and the most able candidates were able to explore the way the writer establishes jovial bonhomie as a way of making the reader more receptive to his point of view. In one striking answer a candidate described this as 'creating a neo-Falstaffian persona' to disguise the 'dangerously radical' policy of subsidised food.

Something that was clearly evident from this year's responses is that the 'paragraph by paragraph' style of commentary and indeed 'the device by device' listing approach proves most unhelpful. These responses were fragmented and comment was decontextualised. It is very important that candidates can show that they have whole text overview in their responses to reading texts.

QUESTION 4

Candidates had plenty to write about their school lunches, indeed as one candidate said, "I welcome the opportunity to let out five years' worth of pent-up anguish and frustration."

For this style of response, adapting tone to the designated audience is crucial and the best letters managed a subtly-persuasive tone which remained conscious of the head teacher's status often with an eye to the school's perceived priorities of achieving exam targets, saving money and achieving Healthy Eating status. Some candidates did not address the letter appropriately (one candidate beginning, 'To my rubbish, so-called headmaster'). Examiners were amused to see the relationships between students and principals varied from very close first names terms to 'Dear Sir or Madam'.

Generally the letter format did help to curtail unnecessary length, although examiners did experience some dismay when the letter moved into, "On Monday we would have…" format. Most letters began strongly but did not always end effectively. Candidates should be encouraged to put equal thought into a suitable 'rounding-off' paragraph to complete these tasks – although **not** the type of conclusion that simply re-states previous content points.

As ever, candidates were witty, insightful, pragmatic, and schools might be well-advised to listen to some of their suggestions. Impassioned pleas for more variety, more cultural awareness and generally more civilised dining experiences were made; 'we should all serve each other at the table and take long enough over our meals to hold a conversation'. Despondent descriptions of the daily reality conveyed shared themes; nowhere to sit, long queues and 'by the time I get there the only filling left is tuna mush.'

QUESTION 5

This generated some of the strongest responses with many being a genuine pleasure to read. This question was generally answered well, with some truly heart-wrenching tales of personal struggle and difficulty. A heavy reliance on school-based themes, options and sixth form, was expected and these choices were well-represented, often delivered effectively, but candidates also surprised us with their inventiveness.

Themes ranged from choosing to seek help for depression, anorexia, bullying, to choosing which parent to live with after a break-up. For some, the question seemed to be an act of catharsis and it was a poignant reminder of the pressures some children are under at school and at home. Other responses, equally compelling, were very entertaining and some students were able to write with flair and sophistication on, for example, creating their new image, trying out a new sport, selecting the family pet - "It's like choosing a brother, you see."

Some responses were a little over-ambitious here, too tied up in complex plots and narratives so that they were very long and lost control, often with a rushed ending and sometimes not actually getting to the moment of decision. As always with A680, clear focus in a well-structured piece of writing is what is required.

OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations)
1 Hills Road
Cambridge
CB1 2EU

OCR Customer Contact Centre

Education and Learning
Telephone: 01223 553998
Facsimile: 01223 552627
Email: general.qualifications@ocr.org.uk

www.ocr.org.uk

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