

Introduction

This being the first year of the new specification, it is likely that students and teachers alike were understandably concerned about this year's exam. However, as far as the Listening exam was concerned, students generally performed well; questions that offer support within the question, such as the multiple choice tasks, were as usual better handled than those where a written response in English is needed.

There were several elements of this exam that were 'new': firstly regarding the question paper itself, there were some 'new' question formats, such as in questions 1, 3 and 4, and multiple choice questions now have four options, rather than three as before. However, these were all introduced in the SAMS, so should not have been a surprise to well-prepared students. Secondly, regarding content, some areas of the new specification, particularly within Themes 4 and 5, have been introduced for the first time, and teachers will hopefully have predicted that at least some of these areas, needing specific vocabulary (such as 'charity shop'), would very likely appear in this year's exam. Lastly, at this Higher level, rather than simply demand recall of a particular lexical item, the majority of questions ask that a student thinks about what he/she has heard and either 'translates' that into other words (e.g. the train is late = the train will be delayed) or has to draw an inference from the spoken words. This does not have to be as difficult as it may sound: for example, if a person is carrying an umbrella in his/her bag, then we can infer that he/she thinks it is going to rain.

Question 1: School trip

The first question on the paper was a relatively familiar context, but a 'new' question format, choosing the correct word from a given set of options. Despite the fact that only part (a) was a straightforward recall question, most students dealt very well with this question, many scoring 4 (out of 5).

The most challenging parts for all students were (d) and (e). This was understandable for (d), as the use of 比我更高 to infer that Simon himself is also tall was aimed at more successful students, but in (e) students let themselves be deceived into thinking the answer must be the last thing they heard (in this case 'panda'), even though Simon clearly says 我非常喜欢青岛的动物园. (He does also go on to be less than complimentary about the pandas. Students should guard against letting their own opinions carry more weight than what they hear!)

Question 2: Tourist Information

Most students dealt very well with the dialogue between the male tourist and the female information officer, many scoring full marks. Those who did lose a mark generally did so in either part (iii) or (iv). In part (iii) the lady gives two pieces of information to indicate that Suzhou is easy to get to (only takes 30 minutes, no need to change train: answer C) without explicitly saying so. Part (iv) also infers that a sweater would be a good idea as the weather will be cold. On this part, some students heard the

question 'Will it rain?', but failed to realise that the reply (不会) invalidated answer B.

Question 3: An inspiring school

In this question, although the topic was ostensibly 'environment' (Theme 5) with several words drawn from the Minimum Core Vocabulary (MCV) list, in fact understanding of these terms was not necessary to complete the task successfully. Perhaps because of the familiar setting (school), most students gained at least 2 marks on this task, despite the lack of 'simple' recall questions. Curiously, many students identified answer A as being correct (which it is), but then crossed it out, having apparently been misled by the mention of 'cups' into thinking that D was a correct answer.

Question 4: Jobs

Despite the fact that only part (c) is a straightforward recall question, the vast majority of students gained full marks here. The two most challenging elements were the last two parts: part (d) needed students to understand that Ai Wei's income was more or less the same as Baoming's (which was given as the example), and part (e) depended on students understanding the implications of the 如果. Students were not expected to understand every word here; simply grasping the implication of 不能买 in the context of an 'if' sentence should have been enough.

Question 5: Summer travels

This question was worth three marks and although none of them was a recall question, the format (multiple choice) helped students make sense of what they had heard. As a result, many students gained full marks, part (ii) being the part of the question that had slightly fewer correct responses.

Question 6: New technology

The subject of this question (using a mobile phone to make payments) might be familiar to young people, but this was the first question on the paper that a significant number of students found difficult; even grade 7 students generally only scored 2. Many responses to part (c) exemplified a common error that occurred when students had to write an answer in English: not answering in terms of the question. Many responses here talked about what the girl's friends did (e.g. They paid using their phones) rather than explain what they found funny about her actions (she wanted to pay in cash). Responses to part (e) also commonly had the correct answer, but then added additional information which invalidated the first part. Thus, for example, a student might write 'People don't use cash any more' (an acceptable answer), but then add, 'but use mobile phones to pay', which is not necessarily implied by the spoken text and invalidates this response.

Question 7: An Olympic athlete

Even more successful students at grade 7 found this question quite challenging, with the need to write an answer in English again proving

more difficult than, say, multiple choice. Although this question was targeted at more successful students, part (a) was designed to be accessible to all, so it was disappointing that a good many responses failed to correctly identify the sport (cycling). In part (d) students again frequently failed to respond in terms of the question: since the question asks how people feel, examiners felt that it was not appropriate simply to write 'best restaurants' as this gives no indication of feeling. On the same question, some misheard 最有名的名胜, answers indicating that students believed they had heard 明星. In part (e) many students only heard the first two characters of the speaker's description of his ability to speak Japanese (不好意思) and thus gave an answer ('not good') which did not describe how bad his Japanese actually is.

Question 8: School improvements!

Despite the relative difficulty and length of this question, many students found the support of the multiple choice options helpful, and the topic of the conversation (moaning about school!) familiar, meaning that even less successful students on this paper gained valuable marks here. At all levels of ability, part aiii was the least well answered; relatively few students recognised that identifying the first part of 新型 would have led to the correct answer. Elsewhere, the number of students who recognised non-MCV vocabulary (e.g. 随便, 考虑) or successfully worked out inferred meaning was impressive.

Question 9: A new tradition, *Guanggunjie*

This was a long text, divided into two parts, the first discussing how this unofficial holiday became a regular occurrence, and the second talking about how people nowadays mark the day and about the problems it has caused. On the whole students dealt better with the first half than the second, often scoring full marks on part (a). Marks were sometimes lost because the English was not accurate enough and hence the intended meaning was wrong: 'boys and girls give each other presents' (ai) is not the same as 'boyfriends and girlfriends.....', 'the date where the month and the day are both number 1' (aiv) could equally be January 1st rather than the date with the most 1s, November 11th.

Many responses to the final question of part (b) again showed students writing down what they heard (污染, pollution) but not looking at the question carefully enough. *Guanggunjie* does not have a negative effect on pollution (this does not really make sense), but rather on the environment. Ironically it was probably students who had gathered a general sense of the end of the passage without hearing too much detail who wrote the correct answer.

Question 10: Tourists in Xi'an

This being the last question on the paper, it was in many ways the most challenging; however, the familiar holiday setting of a tourist briefing, and the multiple choice format meant that even less successful students managed to gain at least 1 mark on each half of the task. There were no 'simple' recall questions here, but there was often enough familiar

vocabulary and a sense from the general tone of the speaker to give clues as to the correct answers.

Conclusion

Finally, a couple of key points for future students:

- students should bear in mind that, as stated in the specification, 'students entered for the Higher tier are required to understand and respond to common or familiar words and/or forms of words that are not on the vocabulary list'; thus, they should expect some questions to test words not on the MCV list, although they can expect support to be given to aid comprehension
- make sure that questions are answered in the terms used; if asked how well someone speaks English, the answer should talk about English ability, rather than say 'he only speaks German'.