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Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2016

Pearson Edexcel International GCSE
in English Language A (4EA0)
Paper 01

Edexcel Certificate
in English Language A (KEA0)
Paper 01

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Introduction

The paper is organised into three sections. Section A tests only reading and is based upon an unseen passage. The passage studied in Section A in January 2016 was adapted from *Desert Flower, The Extraordinary Life of a Desert Nomad* by Waris Dirie and Cathleen Miller. Section B tests both reading and writing by asking candidates to respond to one of the non-fiction passages from the Anthology, in this case, *A Game of Polo with a Headless Goat* by Emma Levine. Section C is a single writing task that is not connected to either of the reading activities already undertaken on the paper. The paper was well received with most candidates finding it very accessible.

Section A: Reading

Questions 1-4

The passage chosen proved to be accessible to almost all candidates, with very few experiencing any difficulties in reading comprehension. The subject matter of January 2015 dealing with the deaths of Mallory and Irvine on Everest in 1924 is historically remote whereas the January 2016 passage is positioned as a current event, as indicated by the use of the present tense in the introduction: 'Waris is a young girl ...She decides to run away ...' This makes it particularly relevant and accessible to candidates. The issue of parental pressure, particularly on girls and within certain cultures is likely to have resonated much more strongly with many candidates than the story of two climbers who died a long time ago, even before their own grandparents were born from the January 2015 paper. The subject matter in January 2016 is more easily appreciated: the danger that we feel from the lion is more immediate than the problems of fussing with the oxygen equipment from the January 2015 paper. In addition, candidates may have found the level of structural complexity in the passage chosen for the January 2016 paper more accessible, and it is worth noting that the passage used this series has fewer shifts between different grammatical tenses than passages that have been used previously.

Question 1 is intended to be a gentle way into the paper and tests the skills of selection and retrieval, asking candidates to give the age of the lion that featured in the passage. There was only a single mark for this question and almost all candidates were able to determine that it was "five or six years old"; either number was accepted as a correct answer. Question 2 asked candidates to select three words or phrases that showed how dangerous the lion was. The mark scheme identifies nine possible responses and many candidates gained full marks but those who did not often did not choose three distinct words or phrases from the selected lines or did not directly answer the question. Question 3 asked candidates to explain what we learn about the writer's mother. As a five-mark question there were many possible responses to this question and the mark scheme lists ten possible responses. Many achieved full or nearly full marks and were able to explain the mother's love for her daughter, her bravery and her calmness in the midst of such an emotional situation. Where candidates did not score full

marks some failed to give sufficient detail for full marks and others listed features without offering any explanation. It is possible to score full marks on this question without finding four distinct characteristics of the mother, as the quality of explanation is a key part of the response. Centres should know that examiners are explicitly instructed to reward the quality of explanation rather than simply counting the number of features that have been identified. In comparison to the January 2015 paper, candidates may have found Question 3 more accessible, as it requires them to write about the mother's character in the context of a mother-daughter relationship, which has a more direct relevance to most candidates than that of two male climbers separated by age and from a different era to their own.

Question 4 was the higher mark tariff question with its greater focus on the writer's technique. This asked candidates about how the writer tries to create tension in the passage and provided bullet points for additional support and structure. At the standardising meeting all markers were made aware of a range of possible interpretations and that they should credit any that were clearly founded in the text. In the published mark scheme examiners are told that they, "must reward all valid points that show an engagement with the text and an appreciation of the writer's technique rather than have a set agenda of items that they are looking for."

Weaker responses to Q4 were often limited to a small number of points focusing on particular elements within the passage, such as the inhospitable terrain of the desert or the obvious danger posed by the lion, though often providing little or no development. Many candidates were able to provide a more detailed understanding of how vulnerable the writer was, the risks she faced and how each contributed to the development of tension; included within this is the incident where she is pursued by her father across the desert and is in danger of being taken back to be forced into a marriage that she does not want. Better answers showed a perceptive and well-developed response to the text with extended comments about the desert and an awareness of sentence-level variety and textual cohesion. Some answers showed a subtle and perceptive understanding as they contrasted the safety of the family home, which the father returns to, with the writer's own dangerous situation. Many commented on the powerful and emotive language used throughout the passage, such as "nightmare journey" or "eternity". Weaker answers were often able to select a number of word-level instances of this whilst better answers explored her use of lists such as the strongly emotive list: "hunger, thirst, fear, pain" and the use of metaphor. Less able candidates often neglected the split in the middle of the passage (indicated by the line of asterisks) and did not comment on the structure of the passage at all.

The most able recognised a range of features and used the text with discrimination to craft an explanation that showed an understanding of the interplay between the terrain, the characters and the situation. Essentially the most successful candidates demonstrated higher skills of analysis and interpretation in evaluating the writer's techniques and did so by directly and doggedly focusing on the question. As has been said before in these reports, linked text and paraphrase does not constitute an explanation. It was a feature of better answers that they were more able to recognize the

fatalism of the writer and how this creates tension and sympathy. They appreciated the shaping of the passage as a whole and saw how the final sentence is highly emotive with its simple desire to return home and the final word, capitalised, creates a strong sense of pathos and shows the writer is still a little girl at heart, yearning for the comfort of her mother.

Section B: Reading and Writing

Question 5

Section B was based upon the pre-prepared text from the Edexcel Anthology for International GCSE English Language and Literature, *A Game of Polo with a Headless Goat*, and focused upon what we learn about Ellen MacArthur. As a prepared text almost all candidates seemed to have knowledge of this text. Weaker responses were often quasi-narratives that did not focus upon the question and simply described the different elements of the race rather than focusing upon the writer's thoughts and feelings. Stronger responses were those that were able to define a range of thoughts and feelings such as her initial boredom and detached amusement which were then replaced by genuine excitement and eventual relief. Stronger answers were then able to evidence those from the text and to explain in detail how those thoughts and feelings were created.

The Section B passage used in January 2016 is a single narrative, consistently told in the past tense with only three real characters, whereas the January 2015 text is a passage that is a journalistic comment combined with a nuanced re-telling of past events and a presentation of the latest disaster rescue, which is what has prompted the writing of the passage. Therefore, candidates may have found the January 2016 passage more accessible. The wording of Question 5 is very similar in both series, however, given the differences between the two passages, candidates may have found answering Question 5 in January 2016 more accessible as reading the passage relied less heavily on skills of inference and deduction than in the previous January series. The thoughts and feelings of Emma Levine are the subject matter of the narrative that she presents whereas the thoughts and feelings of Steven Morris are more complex and are less overt. At times he is mocking and sarcastic, at others he uses the voices of 'experts' and others to voice his criticisms, such as the 'Ministry of Defence' spokesman.

Question 6

The writing task in Section B was closely related to the reading text in section B and asked candidates to write a letter to a local newspaper giving their ideas on how to improve road safety in their area. The title was accessible to almost all candidates and produced a wide range of responses. Many wrote about particular issues local to them or incidents that had occurred in their area. The weakest responses were often incomplete, lacking in paragraphing or structure and communicating at a basic level, often focusing solely upon a very limited range of ideas. Better responses wrote with a skilful command of the language, showing a strong ability to engage the reader in an understanding of the issues that were local to them

and understanding how the suggestions made by the candidate could help to improve the situation.

Section C: Writing

Question 7

Candidates were asked to describe what was important to them in their life. This proved to be accessible to most candidates. Once again, it is noted that the writing responses and particularly the final, 20 mark question, are sometimes not answered at all by some candidates. It is vital that students time their responses carefully and take note of the mark tariff, giving section C one third of the time available to them. This question produced a variety of responses. Weaker responses were often very brief and were limited in their ability to clearly express their ideas, often listing features such as family or friends with no real development at all. Weaker responses often assumed an understanding of family members that was not made clear and were often lacking in paragraphing and a sense of structure, which kept them in the Level 1 and Level 2 mark bands. There was a band of mid-level responses that often had features of both Level 2 and Level 3, with some selection of vocabulary and control that was reasonably good, though sometimes repetitive and lacking in range and making use of slang in what was otherwise a formal piece of writing. More able responses wrote with imagination and communicated passion and interest in what they were describing and created a genuine sense of a relationship with their reader. The best writing showed subtlety and maturity and a control of a wide range of techniques to produce writing that connected strongly with its reader. They were often able to create a very strong sense of character that perfectly demonstrated how important these people were to them, and by doing so were directly responding to the question. On a language front such answers showed a sophistication in control of tense, sentence structure and a genuine understanding of how to create mood and atmosphere. They show a real ability to control text structure and to avoid cliché.

Conclusion

Each section above contains specific advice about what characterises weaker and stronger candidates. Centres are strongly encouraged to practise responding to unseen passages in timed conditions. This will support students in focusing their answers on what the question has asked for and in using their understanding of literary effects as a means of addressing the question rather than being seen as an end in their own right. The same principle applies with regard to studying the Anthology texts. The best practice in writing involves time management so as to respond appropriately to the mark tariff and the time available. Candidates need to focus on developing textual cohesion through effective paragraphing and structuring their writing. At all times candidates should have the intended reader in mind and make word level, sentence level and text level choices with a clear understanding of the intended effect. Writing should be seen as a crafted artefact and students should be taught the skills of writing with this in mind whatever the task may be.

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