

Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination into Form I – 2002

English

Chief Examiner's Report

As in previous years, the board of examiners for the English Paper in the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination tested the candidates' English language competence, by focusing on two main aspects:

- a. The candidate's ability to read and understand a set text.
- b. The individual's ability to write and give clear and correct answers.

To this end, the Specification Grid targeted specific aspects reflecting the objectives and standards set by the syllabus.

The paper's overall distribution of questions was as follows:

Section I and **Section II**, targeting language accuracy and comprehension, carried **70%** of the marks distributed as follows:

- 29%** of the marks were allocated to items with a low level of difficulty.
- 27%** of the marks were for the Medium band.
- 14%** of the marks were concentrated in the High level bracket.

Section III, carried the remaining **30%** of the marks split into three levels of difficulty with 10 marks assigned to each level. This section contained various composition tasks that addressed the candidates' capability of writing as well as their creative potential.

Although immediate feedback following the examination suggested that the paper might have been harder than expected, the examining board believes that the paper was well-balanced, catering for different abilities and gender equality. It was perhaps not immediately appreciated by the critics that, in fact, in most exercises, various answers were considered acceptable (in accordance with the marking scheme). As in other examinations, candidates who could use the language confidently did well. Average candidates obtained a pass mark, while weaker candidates failed to make the grade, even though they did manage some parts of the paper.

In marking the scripts one could observe that multiple-choice questions were handled better by the majority of pupils. On the contrary, composition proved to be a bigger challenge, with frequent incorrect sentence structures, lack of idiom and a high number of grammatical and linguistic errors. While many children appear to be creative, yet where expression of ideas is required, there is much room for improvement. Clearly, many children still have difficulty in expressing themselves in clear simple English.

Reading and understanding, listening and oracy are important and effective ways that could bring about an improvement in children's mastery of the English language. At primary school age, it is difficult for children to logically reason the functions of grammar.

It is therefore inadvisable to focus mainly on the rules of grammar and on controlled exercises in language learning or to drill pupils to set patterns. Changes in class methodologies should start from the early years right through the Junior classes.

Unless children are made aware that English is a real language used for communication and not just a language that belongs to textbooks, there can be little improvement.

A special word of thanks goes to the excellent team at the Educational Assessment Unit, to the members of the examination board and to the markers for their indispensable work.

Chief Examiner

Section I Language

The table below gives an overall view of this section of the paper.

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 1 to 10	<p>As shown in the Specification Grid, the '<i>multiple choice</i>' exercise tested the child's ability to use various parts of speech as well as a variety of essential vocabulary and grammar items within a given context.</p> <p>It was a valid task with three items in the low ability bracket, five items at medium level and two items at a high level of difficulty. Most of the questions were within the candidates' capabilities except for questions 5 and 10 that were more demanding. This was reflected in the low number of candidates getting them right.</p>
Suggested action:	<p>Children need to read more in order to increase their limited vocabulary. Non-fiction, especially literature on current issues, should find a place in the class library and/or as supplementary reading.</p> <p>The fact that some children failed to understand the words '<i>environment</i>' and '<i>habitat</i>' clearly indicates that common issues are not being addressed. Key vocabulary, considered as common everyday jargon, encountered in Social Studies should also be used in English. Moreover language skills should be taught in meaningful communicative/written contexts, organised in terms of concrete experiences and not in isolation.</p>

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 11 to 20	<p>The '<i>cloze</i>' task tested the candidate's ability at following a sequence and identifying specific vocabulary items.</p> <p>It was a balanced exercise with four items in the low ability bracket, three in the medium band and three items targeting the high ability candidate. Although an easy and valid exercise for the age group, there were a number of candidates who failed to use the context to make sense of what they wrote. Spelling errors were evident.</p>
Suggested action:	It is imperative for teachers to assess the children's reading skills through various oral reading tests and not merely through written exercises.

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 21 to 30	<p>This exercise tested the candidates' understanding of phrasal expression and correct verb conjugation. In spite of the rubric and the given example, some students used two words at random.</p> <p>There was medium difficulty in that there were six items at a medium level of difficulty, three at a low level and only one (question 28) at a high level of difficulty. The phrasal verbs targeted were considered to be familiar to the average student.</p>
Suggested action:	<p>Teachers should use English to say real and meaningful things to the class. Varying the way instructions and commands are given, creating situations to elicit purposeful response and conducting instruction in the target language could help children familiarise themselves better with the language. A case in point is question 28.</p> <p>Whereas children may have been exposed to the phrase '<i>Good luck in your exam</i>' one wonders whether they were ever exposed to different phrases such as '<i>I hope you'll succeed</i>', '<i>I hope you'll get through</i>' '<i>I hope you'll do well</i>'. Although initially, such phrases might sound difficult, yet they could become familiar through usage.</p>

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 31 to 35	<p>Students with basic English knowledge should have fared well in this exercise which targeted a specific grammar item but which was basically a descriptive exercise. The candidates were asked to complete the sentences using the Simple Present or Future Simple depending on which part of the sentence was missing, and thus describing the picture. However, most candidates ignored the given help (visual and in the form of sentence patterns).</p> <p>The level of difficulty was well balanced, having one item at a low level, two at a medium level and two at a high level. In general, students did not do well in this section losing marks mostly for spelling errors and incorrect verb agreement.</p>
Suggested action:	<p>It is crucial for teachers to improve their questioning skills. Good questioning techniques help children develop critical thinking skills and inquiring attitudes. <i>'Talk about the picture'</i> rather than <i>'What can you see in the picture?'</i> gives the children more opportunity to be creative and should be encouraged in class.</p>

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 36 to 40	<p>This was a valid exercise that tested the candidates' functional knowledge of language. Students were asked to decipher the meaning of signs in familiar settings. It was a comparatively easy exercise with three items at a low and two at a medium level of difficulty. The majority of students fared well in this exercise which did not demand searching for the right words.</p>
Suggested action:	<p>Although multiple-choice items are considered as valid techniques for assessing reading, it may be a consideration to go beyond multiple-choice in the classroom. Pupils should be asked to give their reasons for making the choice. In this way the teacher can gauge whether the child has provided the correct answer for the right reason or not.</p>

Section II Comprehension

Although slightly long, the illustrated comprehension, set on a loose-leaf for easy access by the candidate, presented candidates with an adapted and relatively simplified version of an extract from John Masefield's book *The Box of Delights*. The passage depicts the story of a boy's entrance into a magical land through the discovery of a mysterious box. It was pitched at the right level and targeted a wide range of students. Even average and below average students appeared to have read and understood the passage, as evidenced by their attempting most of the questions set, with a good number responding correctly.

The questions were set as planned in the Specification Grid. Ten of the questions targeted the low ability students and carried eleven marks. Another eight questions with a medium level of difficulty carried eight marks. Three questions carrying six marks targeted the high ability candidates.

Most markers agreed that the passage was interesting and suitable for the candidates' age group. A few commented that the subject matter in the passage was not within the students' genre. This was perhaps surprising, considering the popularity of *Harry Potter* and other films and books within this genre. Indeed recent reviews of the book included the claim that *The Box of Delights* prefigured *Harry Potter*. While the majority of the markers remarked that the questions were well-graded and suitable for such an examination, one remarked that question 48 was beyond the children's grasp. It is pertinent to point out that most children managed to gain one or two marks for providing a logical answer. The higher ability children gained the full three marks for going beyond the literal in addition to mere recall of text.

The table below gives an overall view of this section of the paper.

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Number 41	A multiple choice question testing the candidate's ability to locate specific information and having a low level of difficulty. Most of the candidates answered correctly.
Number 42 a, b, c, d, e, f	True or False statements eliciting direct or inferential information. The level of difficulty was low for "a" and "d", and medium for "b", "c", "e" and "f". A fair number of candidates answered correctly.
Number 43	A question with a low level of difficulty asking for specific information. Most of the candidates answered the question, but inaccurate sentence structure and/or tense usage distorted communication for many.
Number 44	An open-ended question asking for specific and partly inferential information, and having a medium level of difficulty. As in question 43 many candidates lost marks for incorrect expressions.

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Number 45	Another question asking for specific information with a low level of difficulty. A good number of candidates attempted the question. Some answered correctly showing ability in understanding the question, others used improper sentence structures, and/or quoted irrelevant information, having failed to understand the set question properly.
Number 46	An open-ended question asking for specific and inferential information with a medium level of difficulty. Quite a good number of candidates attempted the question, but as in other questions, irrelevant information was the stumbling block in a number of answers.
Number 47	An open-ended task asking for specific and slightly inferential information with a high level of difficulty. A good number of the candidates answered the question. However a good number ignored the question's rubric or found it difficult to express themselves, and copied directly from the text.
Number 48	An open-ended question asking mainly for inferential information. This proved difficult for those students who still find it a challenge to go beyond literal recall of text. There were, however, a good number of valid responses.
Number 49 a, b, c, d.	A vocabulary related question with a low level of difficulty. A limited number of candidates managed to identify most of the words. Many failed to do so.
Number 50 a, b, c, d.	A vocabulary related question with a low to high level of difficulty. A limited number managed to use the correct vocabulary. Some candidates used wrong tenses, or expression. A good number of candidates still find this task difficult showing inability to distinguish nouns from verbs, and using wrong tenses or expressions.

Suggested Action:

What emerges from this section is that students need to be provided with strategies to enhance understanding. More specifically, they need to be taught comprehension strategies as early as possible in the Primary years including:

- **visualising story elements,**
- **searching for connections between what they read and what they know,**
- **making inferences/predicting while reading,**
- **retelling, synthesizing and summarizing.**

These issues were addressed in one of this year's inset courses for Year 6 teachers. The course assists teachers in using these ideas and will be extended to all Year 6 teachers.

A final point regarding comprehension is that we should perhaps start thinking about introducing listening comprehension in the English timetable and consequently as a possible item in exams.

Section III Composition

In general, children fared worst in this section of the paper. Because this section carried a high portion of the marks, those children who did well here passed the exam, while those who failed in this section, tended to fail the paper. The examining board believes that this is correct given the importance of free writing.

The titles set had the potential to appeal to a variety of children. Although children were free to express themselves creatively, there were also sentences prompting the children to react and think about their choice.

There were plenty of ideas in the children's writings, with some markers stating that some compositions were a pleasure to read. This was especially so in the case of the composition entitled '*The Amazing Thing that came out of the Well*'. However there was also evidence of poor levels in the basic use of language in its written form.

Loss of marks was brought about by:

- Spelling errors
- Incorrect and inconsistent tense usage
- Inappropriate use of memorised idioms
- Similes considered as clichés
- Sentences which were too short and needed to be combined
- Limited vocabulary
- Inaccurate sentence structures
- Indecipherable handwriting.

Increasing errors and irrelevance were also brought about when children wrote beyond the stipulated number of words.

The table below gives an overall view of this section of the paper.

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Number 51 <i>Write a story ending with the words... I had been waiting for ten whole minutes.</i>	This title was the least popular and those who opted for it clearly showed their inability to conceive timespans.
Number 52 <i>Picture Composition: The Thief</i>	As usual, this was the most popular title though some ignored the pictures or the sequence and wrote about a shop being robbed. Some of the given words were used incorrectly. <i>Counter</i> , for instance, was taken to mean the shopkeeper.
Number 53 <i>The Amazing Thing that came out of the Well.</i>	It is worth noting that students who chose this question tended to have a high level of English and produced some excellent compositions.

Number 54 <i>Close to Nature</i>	This was the second least popular of the five titles set. It was quite surprising because candidates could have written about a variety of experiences, given the openness of the title. The majority of those who did choose this title wrote irrelevant sentences that were hardly connected to the title.
Number 55 <i>Letter to a Friend who wishes to visit Malta to get to know about Maltese Customs.</i>	Candidates who chose this composition tended to go out of point. They either ignored the word <i>costume</i> or confused it with <i>costumes</i> and wrote about everything but festivities or events! A few managed to get marks because of their good level of English.

Suggested Action:

One of the observations that emerge from this section is the fact that the Picture Composition is invariably the most popular option. It is almost as though children avoid other types of composition where there is more room for communicating their own ideas.

Perhaps there is a need for students to understand that writing is a communicative process. In this regard, they should be given regular opportunities to explore the use of writing for different audiences and purposes – not just the weekly composition. Moreover, students should be equipped with the skills of writing including prewriting, drafting, editing and revising. If these steps are ignored, the task of creating a composition can appear daunting. Possibilities for pupils to work in pairs and in groups should also be considered for the generation of ideas. Particularly, initially working in pairs or in groups can nurture confidence in the children and break their frequent diffidence when faced with free writing. Children can gradually be expected to work more and more on their own.

One final point worthy of note, is the fact that by the time the student is in Year 6, it is often harder to remedy the shortcomings which could have been put right in previous years. In this regard, Level Descriptors for writing at different levels are being formulated and should serve as guidelines for teachers. In the meantime however, it is imperative for teachers to attend writing workshops and to keep abreast of modern trends in this sphere. The Internet can also be regarded as a learning environment that could help teachers update their knowledge with regards to the teaching of writing.