

Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination into Form I – 2003

English

CHIEF EXAMINER'S REPORT

The board of examiners for the English Paper in the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination aimed to assess the competence of candidates in the English language. The paper sought to reflect the objectives and standards set by the syllabus. It tested the candidates' ability to:

- a. read with understanding a set text;
- b. write and give clear and correct answers.

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:

24% of the marks were concentrated in the low-level bracket.

27% of the marks were for the medium band.

19% of the marks were allocated to items with a high level of difficulty.

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.

Markers commented favourably on the set paper claiming that it targeted a wide spectrum of linguistic skills in a child-friendly way. They also commented that it was suitably graded in difficulty. The layout throughout was thought to be uncluttered. Pictures were considered to be large and clear. It was also noted that all items were presented in meaningful contexts and that there were no items of a formal grammatical nature.

This report highlights students' weaknesses and good practice. It assesses what learners were able to do with the language they learnt.

Section I Language

The table below gives an overall view of this section of the paper and highlights the candidates' strengths and weaknesses.

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 1 to 10	<p>This <i>multiple-choice</i> exercise consisted of a non-fiction text with a gradual unfolding of information about Ham, a chimpanzee astronaut. It tested the candidate's ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – use various parts of speech within a given context; – reason logically to get to the right conclusion. <p>The layout was an improvement on that of previous years in that it was better spaced and therefore clearer to the candidates. As this was a new set-up, alternative ways of indicating the correct answer were accepted, although incidences of different interpretations were minimal.</p> <p>This exercise was well balanced with four items at a medium level of difficulty, four at a low level and only two (questions 6 and 9) targeting the high ability candidate. Although the majority of students fared well, only few candidates got question 6 right.</p>

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 12 to 21	<p>The <i>cloze</i> task tested the candidates' ability to identify specific parts of speech through picture exploitation. This item was considered to be a valid predictor of the candidates' grasp of language. As shown in the specification grid, there were four items in the low ability bracket, three in the medium band and three at a high level of difficulty.</p> <p>Children who inserted more than one word in each blank were not penalised, as long as the words were correct. This was considered to be an appropriate way to mark the papers, as the rubric might not have been clear enough. However in the majority of cases, those who inserted more than one word, got the subsequent words wrong.</p> <p>Many candidates failed to make a distinction between <i>of</i> and <i>off</i> (Question 15) and <i>doctors</i> and <i>doctor's</i> the latter denoting the possessive case - which is what was expected of the candidate's in question 20. In both cases no marks were awarded as the board claimed that this could not be considered as a spelling mistake.</p>

Question	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 22 to 26	<p>This exercise tested the candidates' knowledge of the possible nuances of the verb <i>to tell</i>. There were three items in the low ability bracket and two at medium level.</p> <p>A very high percentage of candidates gave correct responses. The question did not demand searching for the right words because in this case, the words were provided in the paper. Only a few of the candidates were penalised for confusing the last two slots – <i>expressed</i> and <i>remarked</i>.</p>

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 27 to 36	<p>This exercise targeted a specific grammar item - verb tenses and the contracted forms of the verb <i>to be</i>.</p> <p>The level of difficulty was well balanced, having four items at a low level, four at a medium level and two at a high level.</p> <p>Although a comparatively easy exercise for this age group, it clearly showed the students' difficulties with verb formation, especially with regards to irregular verbs. Some failed to insert the contracted form of the verb in numbers 31 and 34.</p>

Questions	Examiners' Comments
<p>Numbers 37 to 41</p>	<p>This was considered to be a valid exercise indicative of the students' level of fluency. It was an exercise which sought to distinguish the better pupils from the rest.</p> <p>Markers commented that the situations depicted in the question were relevant and the prompts adequate.</p> <p>There was a wide variety of sentences formed by students, in particular, for numbers 38, 40 and 41. Worthy of note are the following examples:</p> <p>Have you <i>downloaded the program? / figured out how to use the Internet? / looked up your e-mails/ pressed 'Enter'? / learnt how to use Outlook Express yet?</i></p> <p>Would you <i>like our special menu tonight? / like cheese burger and fries? / like some red wine to go with red meat?</i></p> <p>May <i>I see the book's barcode?</i></p> <p>The answers clearly showed the influence of technology and current social situations.</p> <p>Candidates were penalised for failing to use the correct tense. Regarding the first sentence, some students gave the simplest suitable answer such as <i>Are you lost?</i> and obtained full marks. On the other hand students who proposed the sentence <i>Are you crying?</i> were not rewarded any marks, for the reason that it was more than obvious that the child was in fact crying and this was therefore considered an inauthentic question. By contrast, an excellent attempt was made by a candidate who came up with the question <i>Are you crying because the children in your class bullied you?</i></p>

Section II Comprehension

The one-page comprehension targeted a wide range of students. It was set on a loose-leaf for easy access by the candidates. It presented candidates with an adapted version of a story *Jim, The Fool and the King of Cats* by Alvin Stone, with a visually stimulating presentation. The narrative deals with a boy who was unsure whether to believe his teacher or a tramp as to whether there was really such a thing as magic. Candidates were requested to identify the main points and supporting detail of the passage and to make appropriate inferences. Such inferences were the key to differentiate the grade levels.

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

Only one marker remarked that the passage set was easy, whilst another declared it was an inspired choice of text, interesting, and pitched at the right level. It was also the markers' opinion that the questions were well graded and suitable for such an examination.

The main reason why candidates lost marks was the inability to express themselves in good English, particularly in those questions demanding inference and interpretation of meaning.

The table below gives an overall view of this section of the paper and focuses on candidates' strengths and weaknesses.

Number 42	A multiple choice question testing the candidate's ability to locate specific information and having a low level of difficulty. The high number of candidates who answered correctly confirmed this.
Number 43	True or False statements eliciting direct information. The level of difficulty was low for all questions. A good number of candidates answered correctly.
Number 44	A question with a low level of difficulty demanding an understanding of reference words. Some students found the possessive difficult to express and many were those who wrote mother's Jim instead of Jim's mother. Amongst those who got this wrong are those who are still unsure as to whether <i>her</i> refers to a male or a female, and who therefore wrote down Mr. Petherby for the answer.
Number 45	Another question in the low ability bracket where the students were asked to write down what the word <i>its</i> was referring to. Many students found this easier than question 44.
Number 46	In what seemed to be a quite easy <i>fill in the blanks</i> sentence, many students seemed to have been confused. Many inserted the word <i>can</i> instead of <i>if</i> or <i>whether</i> .

Number 47	<p>An open-ended question asking for inferential information with a high level of difficulty. In answer to the question <i>How can you tell Mr. Petherby was not a young teacher?</i> full marks were awarded only to those who wrote that <i>The teacher used to teach Jim's mother</i>, although there were a few who also added correctly <i>when she was younger</i> or <i>when she was Jim's age</i>. On the other hand, those who only stated that <i>He had been teaching for a long time</i> got one mark. Once again candidates showed difficulty in expressing the possessive case. One rather grave mistake was the incorrect replacement of the word <i>learnt</i> for the word <i>taught</i>. <i>He used to learn Jim's mother</i> was a common occurrence.</p> <p>It is interesting to point out with regards to this question the misconception that a great number of children seem to have with regards to adults and/or teachers. A large number of students wrote that they could tell that <i>Mr Petherby was not a young man because he growled / he wasn't very nice with children</i>.</p>
Number 48	<p>This question asked students to move beyond surface meaning and was considered to have a high level of difficulty.</p> <p>In answer to the question <i>Where was Jim's bedroom?</i> the correct preposition <i>facing</i> or <i>overlooking</i> seemed daunting to several candidates. Few came up with <i>opposite the back fence</i> or <i>at the back of the house</i>, which were considered to be equally correct.</p> <p>Some wrote nonsensical answers such as <i>It was in the sky/ high above the clouds / outside or in front of the moon</i>. Some wrote <i>It was in the house</i> and were penalised as were all those who wrote <i>It was near a window</i>. <i>It was upstairs</i> was only accepted if the students added <i>at the back of the house</i> or <i>facing the backyard</i>.</p>
Number 49	<p>This question with a medium level of difficulty, asked for specific information and for answers which could be copied directly from the text. There were a good number of valid responses.</p>

Number 50	<p>This question provided a very simple metaphor suggesting that <i>the moon was so bright that everything seemed to be painted silver</i>. Although the metaphor may not have been within the reach of all students, there were some excellent interpretations by students who managed to visualise the image and translate what they saw into different words. These included:</p> <p><i>The gleaming moon filled the world with light.</i> <i>The moon illuminated everything with its bright light.</i> <i>The moon's bright light covered all the sky that reflected on earth.</i></p> <p>On the other hand some merely wrote that the moon was shining brightly or that it was a full moon.</p>
Number 51 a, b, c, d.	<p>A vocabulary related question with a medium level of difficulty. A limited number managed to use the correct vocabulary. Some candidates used wrong tenses, or expression.</p>
Number 52 a, b, c, d.	<p>Another vocabulary related question with a medium level of difficulty. A limited number managed to use the correct vocabulary. Some candidates used wrong tenses or expression.</p>

Section III Composition

The main comment to be made upon evaluation of the students' performance in this section, is that there is a need for students to be given more opportunity for writing interesting and original texts. While correct and precise writing are important, these should be better balanced with developing the students' capacity to *think*.

Spelling, punctuation, inaccurate sentence structure and/or incorrect and inconsistent tense usage remain a sore issue. There was a visible inability to maintain a credible and clear sequence of events, which often distorted communication.

It was also clear that students need to better learn to adapt their text to the requirements of the title. In spite of the fact that the titles were varied and straightforward enough, students tended to pick up a single keyword from the title which they recognised from schoolwork, and reproduce some previously written text, often ignoring the specific requirements of the title.

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

Questions	Examiners' Comments
Number 53 <i>The Magic Soup Pot</i>	Many students reproduced the story of <i>The Magic Porridge Pot</i> and followed the same storyline, with the soup overflowing into a village and with some giving it a different ending. There were however a number of interesting and highly imaginative essays.
Number 54 <i>A Terrible Journey</i>	This was the least popular title. Many wrote about an outing.
Number 55 <i>Guests at my birthday party</i>	Regretfully, most candidates who made this choice went out of point. They tended to give a general description of a birthday party, and ignored the word <i>guests</i> .
Number 56 <i>Picture Composition : The Missing Clothes</i>	It was not very encouraging to note that few students actually carried on with the story as requested, choosing instead to reproduce their own lengthy introduction.
Number 57 <i>Letter</i> <i>Michael is writing a letter to his friend Maria, telling her about three of his hobbies. Continue Michael's letter.</i>	This was a very straightforward title, which however tended to produce compositions that lacked originality. Some merely wrote about things they do. Although it may have been assumed that girls could have been disadvantaged in writing about hobbies related to boys, in actual fact, this did not turn out to be the case. It was interesting to note that reading was considered to be a chore, not an activity to indulge in for pleasure.

Issues for improving pupils' achievement in English Language:

Overall, an improvement was noted over the previous year's performance. Nonetheless, on the basis of the corrections in this examination the following overall weaknesses were noted:

- Inaccurate sentence structure
- Misspelling
- Poor use of the possessive case
- Poor verb formation
- Poor inference
- Misuse of words
- Poor visualisation/imagination
- Inadequate proof-reading
- Poor punctuation
- Distorted communication

An attempt should be made to identify and tackle students' language learning difficulties at an early age and to help the child acquire a positive attitude to language learning. This could be achieved through the fostering of new channels of learning for the students. The following suggestions are made:

- Focus on multiple intelligences – not solely verbal and mathematical. This will make the children more receptive to learning in general.
- Practise using the language in real situations, and in contexts that draw on a combination of all language skills. This will help students gain confidence, and therefore use the language more imaginatively.
- Involve students in a more conscious assessment of what they have produced by indicating errors on a one-to-one basis. This will reinforce learning and teach the students to evaluate their own work.
- Supplement textbook material by other forms of exercise (as opposed to even more photocopied controlled exercises). Speaking, reading aloud, giving space to thought, imagination and visualisation will produce better performance in the language by students as well as much better results in examinations. Songs, art and language games may help English be more exciting and therefore result in better and more imaginative use of the language by children.