

Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination into Form I – May 2004

ENGLISH

CHIEF EXAMINER'S REPORT

The objective of the board of examiners for the English Paper in the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination was to assess the competence of candidates in the English language. The examination paper, sought to reflect the objectives and standards set by the syllabus as planned in the specification grid. It tested the candidates' ability to:

- a. read with understanding written language;
- b. write clear and correct answers to a given text;
- c. produce writing that is logical, cohesive and sequential.

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

Section I and **Section II** targeting language accuracy, comprehension and writing capability carried **70%** of the marks.

- 21%** of the marks were allocated to items with a high level of difficulty.
- 29%** of the marks were allocated to the medium band.
- 20%** of the marks were allocated to the low-level bracket.

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

The paper followed the same format and layout as that of the previous year. For the purpose of identifying the pupils' strengths and weaknesses in communicating ideas through their writing, markers this year focused on the following three traits:

- Composition and content;
- Text structure and organisation;
- Sentence structure and punctuation.

Marks were awarded accordingly.

Markers commented favourably on the set paper claiming that it was more skills oriented and less memory based. They also commented that presenting all items within relevant and authentic contexts improved communication.

This report highlights and assesses what learners were able to do with the language they learnt. As in previous examinations, candidates who could use the language confidently did well. Average candidates obtained a pass mark, that is they achieved level 4 according to the recently published Level Descriptors. Weak candidates who failed to make the grade, managed some parts of the paper achieving a lower level even as low as level 1.

Section I Language

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

Numbers 1 to 10	<p>This <i>multiple-choice</i> exercise tested the candidate's ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– use various parts of speech within a given context;– analyse and reason logically to get to the right conclusion. <p>It consisted of a non-fiction text with gradually unfolding information about the Caldecott medal. The medal is awarded annually to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children, in honour of Randolph Caldecott, the nineteenth-century English illustrator.</p> <p>Candidates scored on the basis of the number of correct answers. The majority started off well on an exercise that was well-graded – two items (questions 3 and 6) at a low level of difficulty, six items (questions 1, 2, 4, 7, 9 and 10) at a medium level and only two (questions 5 and 8) targeting the high ability candidate. Regarding question 5, although the words <i>irritate</i>, <i>annoy</i> and <i>upset</i> did not seem to be within the students' vocabulary, one could assume that the word <i>please</i> was and that the candidate could have inferred the correct answer through logical sequencing and elimination.</p>
Numbers 12 to 21	<p>The <i>cloze</i> task was considered to be a valid predictor of the candidates' grasp of language. It was an exercise which sought to distinguish the better pupils from the rest. It tested the candidate's ability to read, understand and insert the correct form of a verb and different parts of speech.</p> <p>Presenting it in the form of a dialogue made it possible for candidates to follow the story-line. As shown in the specification grid, there was a reasonable mix of low, medium and high level questions - two items in the low ability bracket, four in the medium band and four at a high level of difficulty.</p> <p>Many candidates, however, found difficulty in choosing the right terms particularly in numbers 14, 15, 17 and 20. These were in fact considered as having a high level of difficulty. In number 16, although many knew the expression <i>a bar of chocolate</i>, yet only a few came up with the correct spelling of the word <i>chocolate</i>.</p>

Question	Examiners' Comments
Numbers 22 to 26	This exercise tested the candidates' capability of matching each poster to the right sentence and forming adverbs. Marks were allotted for each correct part. Although in the majority of cases the matching was correct, yet some candidates failed to spell correctly the words <i>easily</i> and <i>hungrily</i> . Inserting the word with a capital letter was also a common error.
Numbers 28 to 31	This exercise targeted a specific grammar element - the comparative. The level of difficulty was well balanced, having two items at a low level, one at a medium level and one at a high level. A few candidates inserted the word <i>gooder</i> instead of the irregular comparative <i>better</i> , and/or misspelt the word <i>heavier</i> .

Section II Comprehension

The one and a half page comprehension targeted a wide range of pupils. It was set, as usual, on a loose-leaf for easy access by the candidates. It presented candidates with an adapted version of one of the chapters of the story *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. The narrative deals with a girl who befriends sparrows by throwing breadcrumbs to them from her attic window. Candidates were requested to identify the main points and supporting detail of the passage and to answer both literal and inferential questions. Such inferences were the key to differentiate the grade levels.

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

The majority of markers remarked that the chosen passage, required thought but was pitched at the right level and therefore suitable for such an examination. It was also the markers' opinion that the questions were well-graded and provided an excellent exercise in differentiation.

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

Number 32 a, b, c, d	These were True or False statements eliciting direct information with two questions at a low level of difficulty and two at a medium level. A good number of candidates answered all questions correctly.
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Number 33	This was a multiple choice question testing the candidate's ability to locate specific information. The level of difficulty was medium. A very high percentage of candidates gave a correct response.
Number 34	This question with a medium level of difficulty demanded an understanding of the referring words. On the whole most pupils could tell that <i>others</i> referred to the <i>(bread)crumbs</i> . A small percentage thought it referred to <i>the other birds</i> .
Number 35	This was a question in the low ability bracket where the pupils were asked to fill in the blanks with a suitable word (describing the sparrows). <i>Greedy</i> and <i>Hungry</i> were excellent attempts by many. The words <i>little / lovely / three / friendly</i> although simpler were likewise acceptable. <i>Relative</i> , on the other hand was a common insertion but not considered acceptable.
Number 36 a, b, c, d	This was a vocabulary-related question where pupils were asked to give the meaning of four words as used in the passage. <i>Accustomed to</i> , as expected, was considered as having a high level of difficulty and therefore quite taxing for most pupils. On the other hand <i>twinkling</i> and <i>alarmed</i> were within the reach of many. The board agreed that the following words could be accepted as suitable meaning for the word <i>evidently</i> : <i>obviously, certainly, surely, undoubtedly, definitely, of course</i> .
Number 37	It was evident by some of the answers given that most candidates did not know the meaning of the word <i>perch</i> . Some gave nonsensical answers such as <i>The sparrow was perched on his eyes / on his head / on one side of his head / in the bottom...</i>
Number 38	This question seemed daunting to many who did not even attempt to go further than <i>He flew at the biggest crumb with a lightning peck</i> . Some good interpretations were provided by high fliers, as for instance: <i>He quickly flew down and with his beak snatched the largest breadcrumb</i> .
Number 39	This question had a medium level of difficulty and asked for specific information and for answers which could be copied directly from the text. There were a good number of valid responses but once again the average pupil failed to interpret the main idea.
Number 40	In what seemed to be an easy and straightforward question, many pupils seemed to have been confused. Some overlooked the fact that they were asked to give two reasons. Candidates could have tried to think of what makes a nest a nest and conclude that it is usually small, built high up, a home, birds come near it or in it...

<p>Number 41</p>	<p>This was an open-ended question asking for inferential information with a high level of difficulty. The first part was answered correctly by many, but the justifications given were out of point. Still, the candidates who answered correctly gave interesting and plausible answers which were generally coherent. Worthy of note was the following:</p> <p><i>The unexpected friends were Sara and Lottie because the sparrows never thought that they would throw them crumbs of bread to eat and not harm them.</i></p> <p>It was also deemed appropriate to accept as correct the fact that the birds were the unexpected friends to Sara and Lottie. The girls never expected them to become friendly.</p>
<p>Number 42</p>	<p>Candidates were apparently not prepared for this somewhat straightforward exercise in observation and reporting skills. Others misread the rubric, especially the part which said that Sara had left the room. A few just copied word for word from the passage. Some opted for creative writing and were slightly rewarded for doing so, although this was not what was expected.</p> <p>The following example is commendable:</p> <p><i>As he looked, the sparrow, saw a very ugly room. There weren't a lot of things around. The floor was bare and the walls were faded. The paint was peeling off in some places.</i></p>

The main reason why candidates lost marks in this section was due to their inability to move beyond surface meaning, particularly in those questions demanding inference and interpretation of meaning.

Marks deducted for orthography and syntax were minimal when compared to the global mark. It was considered fair that a child who writes:

“Sparrow perched was to top the cimney.”

should lose one of the two marks allotted, when compared to a child who was able to write:

“The sparrow was perched on (top of) the chimney.”

Section III Composition

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

Questions	Examiners' Comments
<p>Number 43</p> <p><i>My Favourite Shopping Centre</i></p>	<p>This was a popular title although most candidates wrote about a supermarket. The best compositions were those where the candidates gave reasons to explain why they liked the particular shopping centre.</p>
<p>Number 44</p> <p><i>The Old Tree in the Valley</i></p>	<p>This was the title that unleashed the creative child's imagination. Indeed there were a number of interesting and highly imaginative essays written for this title.</p>
<p>Number 45</p> <p>Write a story ending with the following words: <i>..... and at last I found out what the scratching sound on the garden door was.</i></p>	<p>The candidates were expected to narrate an event that ended with the given words. There was not much variation in the ideas which were expressed.</p>
<p>Number 46</p> <p><i>Imagine you are Paul or Paula. Write a letter to your classmate Sandro who is in hospital. In the letter, describe a special activity that took place at school, when Sandro was absent.</i></p>	<p>Candidates were expected to write a letter using the given address. Marks were deducted for the incorrect format for letter writing and for writing mainly on Sandro's ailments rather than on the main issue, namely the activity. On the other hand those candidates who gave evidence for writing for an audience – the sick classmate – and focused on the activity, got extra marks.</p>
<p>Number 47</p> <p>Picture Composition: <i>A Fishing Adventure</i></p> <p><i>One day Joseph and John decided to go fishing ...</i></p> <p><i>Continue the story.</i></p>	<p>The majority of candidates, as usual, opted for the picture composition. A marker commented that the picture composition is the refuge of the lower-ability pupils and that it limits creativity and originality. One has to admit that what was basically expected of the pupil in this composition was creating a narrative emphasising the salient points of the picture sequence. However, a few noteworthy writings were produced clearly showing that candidates can definitely enhance their creativity and originality when they choose to write about the picture composition through their choice of words and details that elaborate the main idea depicted in the pictures.</p>

Implications for Teaching and learning

Following the analysis of the results of this exam, it may be concluded that slightly more than half (54%) of the pupils who sat for the exam achieved a level 4 or higher, on the scale of the recently published Level Descriptors for English. The majority of the pupils showed an ability to interact with text and a level of competence in producing independent writing for a specific purpose and audience.

As to the rest of the pupils, the following flaws were evident particularly in Sections 11 and 111:

- Inability to understand a question / text properly
- Irrelevant detail
- Repetitive phrases
- Incorrect and inconsistent tense usage
- Lack of punctuation especially when using direct speech
- Poor spelling
- Misuse of words
- Poor expression of ideas
- Inability to produce sustained accurate writing

Improvements in the level of English should be targeted at these difficulties. Teachers should be encouraged to identify how they can help learners achieve higher all round levels. The following suggestions may help in this regard:

- Language learning should not only be about the accumulation of perfectly mastered elements of grammar and vocabulary but also about using the language in real situations and in contexts that draw on a combination of all skills.
- Teachers should provide pupils with a range of strategies to enhance understanding of text. Such strategies include visualising story elements, scanning across a whole text to identify the main idea and relevant details, making inferences and predicting while reading and retelling a story.
- Pupils need to learn to select appropriate, effective and correctly spelt vocabulary, to use connectives to form longer sentences and to demarcate sentences accurately.
- One way of helping pupils aim towards independent writing is by equipping them with the skills of breaking the writing process into manageable stages, such as reflection, self-checking, self-correction and redrafting.
- Peer-feedback is interesting to pupils, promotes active learning and increases pupils' editing skills. This should be encouraged and can be carried out in pairs or in small groups, orally or in writing.