

Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination into Form 1 – May 2005

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 candidates' linguistic competence in English. The examination paper sought to reflect the objectives and standards set by the syllabus and which appear in the specification grid. It examined the candidates' ability to:

- a. use English accurately
- b. read with understanding
- c. produce writing that is accurate, logical, cohesive and sequential.

Section I (Language Use) targeted language accuracy and carried 40% of the marks.

8% of the marks were allotted to items with a high level of difficulty.

21% of the marks were allotted to the medium band.

11% of the marks were allotted to the low-level bracket.

Section II (Comprehension) targeted the candidates' ability to understand a text's surface meaning as well as deduce and infer meaning. This section carried 30% of the marks.

10% of the marks were allotted to items with a high level of difficulty.

11.5% of the marks were allotted to items of medium difficulty.

8.5% of the marks were allotted to items considered to have a low-level difficulty.

Section III (Composition), which carried the remaining 30% of the marks, had varied composition tasks within the candidates' experience of writing. It also gave scope to the candidates' creative abilities. The level attained in this section depended on the individual candidate's ability in tackling the task.

Markers commented favourably on the examination paper claiming that it was very candidate friendly and pitched at the right level. They also commended the presentation of all items within an authentic context which helped assess candidates' communicative skills.

This report highlights and assesses what the candidates were able to do with the language they had mastered at the expected level. As in previous examinations, candidates who could use language confidently did well. Average candidates obtained a pass mark. Weak candidates scored very low in the examination and failed to obtain the standards required.

Section 1 Language

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

Numbers 1 -- 10	<p>This multiple-choice exercise tested the candidate's ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• read with understanding;• understand the linguistic use of parts of speech which help towards building a sequential and cohesive context;• analyse and reason logically to get to the right conclusion. <p>It consisted of a non-fiction text with gradually unfolding information about Robert Baden-Powell and the setting up of the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides.</p> <p>Candidates scored on the basis of the number of correct answers. Most candidates started off well on an exercise that was well-graded – two items (questions 2 and 4) at a low level of difficulty, six items (questions 1, 3, 5, 6, 9 and 10) at a medium level and only two questions (questions 7 and 8) targeting the high level candidate.</p> <p>Many candidates were not familiar with the past tense of <i>to found</i> (question 8) and thus failed to get this item correct. Similarly, those candidates that did not manage to make the logical link in question 5, did badly in the subsequent items which examined the ability to show an awareness of cohesive (connecting) devices and to deduce and infer meaning from context.</p>

<p>Numbers 12 -- 17</p>	<p>This exercise tested the candidate's ability to use English functionally as well as to use a particular grammar point: the imperative in the affirmative and negative. Candidates had to match a picture or symbol to the right sentence and fill in with the correct verb in the affirmative or negative imperative of the verb.</p> <p>Three items were set at a medium level of difficulty and three at a low level of difficulty. The exercise was meant to test accuracy. Most candidates did well in this exercise. However, there were instances where many candidates did not use capital letters to start the sentences. Quite a few candidates did not seem to understand the significance of a 'crossed out' visual, although an example was given to make the exercise as student-friendly as possible.</p>
<p>Numbers 18 -- 25</p>	<p>This was an exercise which tested the ability to use language accurately by filling in the missing words in a letter after making the correct choice from a given list of prepositions. It also assessed the candidates' ability to give and understand directions when making use of a simple map.</p> <p>The exercise was a selective one and discriminated positively among candidates. Two items (22 and 23) were at a low level of difficulty; two (19 and 24) were at a medium level and 4 items (18, 20, 21, 25) were at a high level of difficulty.</p> <p>The better candidates who followed the instructions in the exercise rubric fared well. The weaker ones ignored the instructions and did not make use of the map given. It seems that most candidates found difficulty in distinguishing between 'in front of' and 'near', though they had the map to help them. Prepositions, also, seem to be an item that poses difficulty to many candidates.</p> <p>It was a challenging exercise that needed concentration and accuracy.</p>
<p>Numbers 27 -- 36</p>	<p>This exercise targeted the correct use of verb forms / tenses. The exercise was a carefully graded exercise with 3 items (29, 31, 33) at a low level of difficulty; 5 items (27, 30, 34, 35) at a medium level of difficulty and 2 items (28, 36) at a high level. The item that posed the greatest difficulty was number 28 which featured the present perfect tense. Very few candidates managed to answer this item correctly. Most candidates seemed to find difficulty in recognizing the need to use the present perfect within the given context.</p> <p>Many candidates, however, fared well in the rest of the exercise.</p>

<p>Numbers 50 -- 59</p>	<p>The <i>cloze</i> task proved to be a very valid indicator of the candidates' grasp of language. In fact, markers pointed out that there was a strong correlation between how candidates fared in this task and how they fared in the composition.</p> <p>The task consisted of a story from a newspaper. The two-column format, pictures, headline and byline were reproduced to make the task as authentic as possible. It was a well-graded task and again it was one that discriminated positively, showing off the better-able candidate from the rest.</p> <p>There were 2 items (51 and 54) aimed at a low level of difficulty, 6 items (50, 53, 55, 56, 57, 58) aimed at a medium level of difficulty and 2 items (52 and 59) targeted a high level of difficulty.</p> <p>Many candidates found items 50, 52, 56 and 58 difficult. Surprisingly, many candidates did not know the noun <i>station</i> as used in 'police station', erroneously using the word (police) <i>office</i> instead. Many candidates managed to come up with the correct answers but then spelled them incorrectly. Another common weakness among candidates was the fact that they tended to read every sentence in isolation instead of attempting to understand the text as a whole.</p>
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Section II Comprehension

The five-hundred word comprehension passage targeted as wide a range of candidates as possible. The text was set, as usual, on a loose leaf for easy access by the candidates. It presented candidates with an adaptation of a short story called *Face to Face* written by Jessie Reid and Margaret Donaldson. The narrative deals with a girl who has a frightening experience with a sea monster on her tenth birthday. Candidates were requested to identify the main points and supporting detail of the passage and to answer literal and inferential questions.

The questions were set as planned in the Specification Grid. 8.5 marks were allotted to questions with a low level of difficulty; 11.5 marks to questions with a medium level of difficulty and 10 marks to questions with a high level of difficulty.

The aim of the exercise was to test comprehension of the text. Therefore, the emphasis was on rewarding comprehension rather than on accuracy in grammar and spelling thus avoiding excessive penalties for grammar and spelling in a reading comprehension exercise. However, syntactical errors in the answers were penalised.

All markers remarked that the passage appealed to the age group and the pictures accompanying the text helped the candidates to familiarise themselves with the text. Moreover, markers pointed out that the chosen text was pitched at the right level, whilst the questions examined both the candidates' comprehension and their ability to reach logical conclusions.

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

Number 37 a -- f	<p>These were True or False statements eliciting direct information with 3 statements at a low level of difficulty, 1 at a medium level and 2 at a high level of difficulty.</p> <p>A good number of candidates ticked boxes at random without trying to understand what was being asked of them.</p>
Numbers 38 -- 40	<p>Two of these questions (38 and 40) were of a medium level of difficulty whilst number 39 was of a low level of difficulty. Questions number 39 and 40 tested the candidates' ability to locate specific information, whilst number 38 tested their ability to infer and deduce from context as well as locating specific information. A high percentage of candidates gave correct answers.</p>
Number 41 a, b	<p>This was a question with a low level of difficulty where candidates had to locate specific information. The majority of candidates gave the correct answers.</p>
Number 42 a, b	<p>Question 42a was of a medium level of difficulty whilst question 42b was of a high level of difficulty. Both answers were aimed at deducing meaning from context. Many candidates were not able to give a different reason and just repeated the first reason they gave in other words.</p>
Number 43	<p>Question 43 was of a low level of difficulty and asked candidates to locate specific information. Many candidates managed to answer correctly.</p>
Number 44 a, b	<p>Questions 44a and 44b were of a medium level of difficulty. Both answers were aimed at deducing meaning from context. Many candidates answered correctly.</p>
Number 45	<p>Question 45 targeted the high level of difficulty. High-level comprehension skills were required as the question demanded candidates to infer from context. Many candidates found it difficult to answer correctly because they were not able to move beyond surface meaning.</p>
Number 46 a, b	<p>Question 46a was of a medium level of difficulty whilst question 46b question was of a high level of difficulty. Both answers were aimed at inferring meaning from context. A great number of candidates answered incorrectly because they did not understand what they were being asked. In fact, many thought they were being asked about how Fiona fought the monster not <i>why</i>.</p>
Number 47	<p>The question with a low level of difficulty demanded an understanding of referring words. Most candidates managed to answer correctly.</p>
Number 48 a, b, c	<p>This was a vocabulary related question where the candidates were asked to give the meaning of three words as they were used in the text. Numbers 48a and 48c were of a high level of difficulty whilst number 48b was of a low level of difficulty. In fact, very few candidates managed to give the right meaning of <i>immobile</i>.</p>

On the whole many of the candidates did well in the comprehension section. Marks were lost in this section because candidates did not manage to read beyond surface meaning especially in those questions that demanded inference and interpretation of meaning.

Section III Composition

There was a good choice of composition titles. The most popular, as usual was the Picture Composition whilst the least chosen was title number 60. Markers noted an improvement in the quality of writing especially with regard to paragraphing and better expressions showing originality. Some markers came across a few pieces of writing that were “outstanding” and “a pleasure to read”.

The writing task, in fact, distinguished between the readers and the non-readers. The weaker pieces of writing were marked by poor tense usage, spelling and syntax. Memorised expressions and idioms used out of context was another flaw in the writing task.

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

Questions	<i>Examiners' Comments</i>
Number 60 Write a story which starts with the following word: <i>The animal stood there looking at me. “Why did you do that?” the animal asked. I was astonished to hear the animal speak...</i>	This was the least chosen title. It selected the academically superior candidates as well as the more creative ones. There were some outstanding pieces of writing among the candidates who chose this title.
Number 61 You are taking part in a competition in which you have to write about a person. Write about a person you know.	This was a popular choice. However, some candidates misunderstood the title and wrote about a competition instead of about a person they know.
Number 62 Imagine you are Andrea. Last week you were ill and had to spend a day in bed. You decided to write a letter to a friend about what happened on that day. Your address is: 51, Long Street, Luqa LQA 88. Write the letter.	This was the second most popular choice. It was clear that most candidates have mastered the correct letter format. The most common mistake was that some candidates wrote about what happened during a whole week or several days thus departing from the instructions in the title.
Number 63 A shining Old Coin	Another popular choice. There were some very good pieces of writing by candidates who chose this title. On the other hand, it was obvious that several candidates tried to fit memorised material to this narrative title.
Number 64 Picture Composition: The New Nestbox	The majority of candidates, as usual, opted for the picture composition. Unfortunately, this choice elicited the worst and most humdrum responses.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Analysis of the examination results show that 64.7% of pupils who sat for the examination achieved a pass in English, thus achieving a level 4 or higher on the scale of Level Descriptors of the reading and writing skills (which are the two skills examined). The majority of candidates, therefore, were able to interact with a text, write for a specific purpose and audience and to handle discrete linguistic responses (e.g. verb forms / tenses) in a fairly accurate and communicative function.

The rest of the candidates showed an inability in all or most of the following:

- understanding a question or text
- understanding and following rubrics
- the use of relevant detail
- understanding beyond surface meaning
- the use of appropriate vocabulary
- consistent tense usage
- correct spelling
- proper use of punctuation
- good expression of ideas
- production of sustained accurate writing
- producing grammatically correct sentences
- handling syntax properly

It is to be noted that pupils at primary level have to be exposed to the English Language not only through reading but also through listening to the language. It is only thus that pupils can acquire the required fluency in the language. Furthermore, teachers are to ensure that learners are helped to acquire cognitive reading skills which go beyond the lifting of parts of the text in order to give responses and which therefore limit the reading process to a mere identification of the relevant segment where specific details are found. Inferential skills and questions which demand a deeper interaction with the text have to be given due importance.

Teachers should strive to teach the language within a context and the context should be as authentic as possible. Isolated language (grammar) drills do not help to improve the quality of the language.

When it comes to the writing skill, teachers should expose their pupils to as many types of writing genres as possible. Pupils should be trained to plan, revise and edit their work. Celebrating pupils' work by publishing it (in the school magazine, putting it up in class...) is one way of reinforcing good writing skills.