

Examiners' Report Summer 2008

O Level

O Level Classical Arabic (7603)

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7603 Paper 1

Question 1

Of the two passages to be translated into English, Question One was more challenging, with many candidates finding it difficult to decode a number of phrases and expressions. Among these were: 'the Mahdi stood in the prayer niche' (*waqafal-mahdi fil-mihrab*); 'the doorman/usher called al-Hajib' (*ar-rabee'ul-hajib*); an old piece of animal hide (*qit'atu adeemin*); 'you deliberately took the source of your income and livelihood of your children and slaughtered it' (*'amadta ilaa maksabika wama'ishati awlaadika fadhabahtahaa*); and 'I swear by God, I will honour all the promised amount, even if that is the only sum left in the treasury' (*wallahi, la-unafidhannahaa lahu kullahaa walaw lam yakun fi baytil-maali siwaahaa*).

Notwithstanding the above, the majority of candidates succeeded in achieving a high mark overall.

It was somewhat disappointing that some candidates are still failing to render common classical Arabic expressions such as *ameer al-mu'mineen*, *al-mahdi*, *khalifa*, *mihrab*, *wudu*, *bayt al-maal* and the place name *Basrah* inappropriately. This would seem to indicate that candidates are not being sufficiently schooled in background knowledge of the culture of the language, which I hope teachers would bear in mind when preparing candidates for the examination.

Question 2

Generally speaking, students made a valiant attempt to translate the whole of the passage with few omissions. The opening word *laytahu* proved difficult for the majority of candidates to translate accurately. Many did not recognise that *sineen* is the place name of a mountain in Lebanon, nor did they understand the word *safh* (foothills) before it. Words that even the most able candidates found challenging included *qissees* (clergyman, priest), *khayyaat* (tailor) and *wahshatin* (isolation). The top candidates succeeded in translating the phrase *wasu'ubayyidu wajhal-mu'allimi-lladhi-ikhtaarani* (I would honour the teacher who singled me out from all the children of Baskinta) very well, as well as the final phrase *wakaana huwal-aakharu min khirreejeehaa*, most particularly in the rendition of *aakharu* as 'also' rather than 'last' which caught many of the less able candidates out.

Some candidates misread *al-burooda* (coldness, coolness) as *al-barooda* (gun, rifle), and many also translated *aabaa* (I refuse to) as 'I want to' because of its similarity in appearance to the Gulf colloquial phrase *abee*. Many candidates did not recognise that the narrator (the 'I' at the beginning of the passage) was one and the same person as the central character Mikhail Yusuf who was subsequently referred to in the third person.

It was pleasing to see a lessening in the use of slang overall this year, and that students seemed to be striving towards a more formal style of English as is appropriate for the task in hand. It is essential that teachers preparing candidates for the examination should remind them of the requirement to write in a formal English style, as well as not to summarize or paraphrase the text, but rather to attempt to translate it both fully and accurately with due attention to detail.

Question 3

This exercise is designed to test students' knowledge of Arabic grammar in detail, so they should be prepared for the task accordingly. Particular weaknesses thrown up by this exercise this year included:

- a failure to identify *daraahimu* and *mabaaligha* as diptotes and to apply the correct case endings
- a weakness in knowledge of the subjunctive mood, such as the vocalisation *li-ahfazahaa*, *an tas-haba*, *an yushfiqa* and *an yastakhiffa*.
- lack of knowledge of the genitive and the correct placement of the kasra (*harf ul-jarr*) following prepositions or in *idafa* constructions
- incorrect rendition of *tanween fatha* - many candidates wrote an additional, unnecessary fatha on the letter before the *tanween*, such as in the vocalisation of *nazaran*. Ideally, the two fathas should be placed on the letter before the final alif of convention, and not on the alif itself.

Question 4

By and large, candidates showed a good understanding of the passage and were able to decode it correctly. Apart from certain aspects of vocabulary that posed some difficulties, such as 'mirage', 'pool', 'thumb' and 'sticking', their encoding of the text was generally not far off the mark.

However, there were some sentence structures that caused certain difficulties in rendering them into meaningful Arabic. For example, the sentence 'he could walk for no more than another hour, maybe two, before he had to turn back' was often encoded incorrectly. 'Another hour, maybe two' should more appropriately have been rendered using the phrase *saa'atin ukhraa walarubbamaa lisaa'atayni* rather than *saa'atan ukhraa ow/am saa'atayni* or *saa'atin ukhraa yumkin saa'atayni*. Many missed the nuance of 'had to' in the phrase 'he had to turn back', rendering it as *qabla an ya'uda* or *qabla an yarji'a*, instead of *qabla an yata'ayyana 'alayhi* or equivalent.

In the second paragraph, many candidates translated 'he was hot...' as *kaana haaran/harraan/showbaan*. A better expression would have been *kaana yash'uru bil-harri (wal-irhaaqi wal-joo'i...)*.

Many candidates were unaware that 'to close one's eyes' should be translated using the specific Arabic verb *aghmada*, rather than the general word for 'to close' or 'to shut': *aghlaqa*. The expression 'It seemed pointless' also proved challenging and would often be rendered loosely in an attempt to convey the basic gist of the phrase.

The numbers in the English text proved somewhat challenging for some. Candidates would often try to take a shortcut by translating the numbers using figures rather than words (a hundred yards, five miles, fifty miles). Teachers must ensure that candidates are fully conversant in the rules governing Arabic numbers, and that they are aware that they should be written out in full.

Question 5

The main weakness in the candidates' performance in this task this year was in their handling of verbs appropriately. In sentence (a), many candidates did not know how to formulate the second person feminine singular imperative; in sentence (f) they did not use the second person feminine plural, and in (h) they did not use a singular feminine verb at the beginning of the sentence. In (h) also, 'my two sisters' was often rendered as *ukhtee al-ithnayn* or *akhawaatee al-ithnaan*, when the correct rendition should have been *tadh-habu ukhtaaya...* 'Their school' in sentence (h) also challenged many candidates. This would suggest that many students are not being sufficiently grounded in the application of feminine verbs and the use of the dual with attached pronouns.

Statistics

Paper 1

Grade	A	B	C	D	E
Boundary mark	73	61	49	44	29

Note:

Boundary mark: the minimum mark required by a candidate to qualify for a given grade.

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