

## ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) MONITORING BOARD ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXAMINATION

### Examiners' Report - November 2008 session

The four components of the EFL Monitoring Board examination presented candidates with varying challenges. Overall, candidates performed best on Section C; the component which, once again, proved most challenging was the Writing skills section. It is interesting to note that candidates' performance across the sections is not always stable; some candidates who struggled with Section A were able to pass in Section B and C.

### Section A

Although the majority of the candidates can be said to have done fairly well in this section, a small number failed to meet the pass mark in this section. Also, performance varied quite considerably on the various parts of this section.

**Part 1** consisted of 20 multiple-choice questions that tested the candidates' ability to identify various parts of speech and grammatical items as contextualised in a passage of continuous prose. Most of the candidates, with a few notable exceptions, succeeded in scoring high marks in this part of the test, finding little problem with the tenses, but encountering some problems with relative clauses and adverbial phrases.

**Part 2** consisted of ten words where the candidates had to identify the stressed syllable for each word in accordance with its given grammatical form. Once again the scores were quite satisfactory.

**Part 3** required the candidates to rewrite 10 phonemic transcriptions of single words into normal spelling. Although this should have been a fairly straightforward exercise, a fairly high number of candidates failed to identify all of the ten words, finding particular difficulty with words like *dentures*, *harness* and *entourage*. In a number of cases, the words were identified correctly but spelled wrongly. This was perhaps the most alarming error of all.

**Part 4** which asked candidates to write out ten words in phonemic script, posed the biggest challenge of all and caused a high number of candidates to achieve the lowest scores out of the four parts of Section A. Given the importance of phonology in Section A, candidates would be well advised to give greater consideration to it when preparing for this test.

### Section B

**Part 1** Overall candidates completed Part One well; however some candidates would have benefitted from more accurate description of grammatical usage,

form and meaning. Candidates should have been aware that Part One Section B carried 4 marks for each question and proportionately more time needed to be spent on this part of section B than the others. Those who managed this task well wrote clear, concise grammatical explanations which would have been easily transferable to classroom context; those who scored poorly were those who were unable to clearly explain why the odd one out was in fact different from the other sentences in the group. In general, modal verbs and possessives, conditional sentences and passive structures seemed to cause few problems for the candidates to initially identify. Few candidates gained full marks for each question as they were often too brief in their language analysis. Often candidates did not follow instructions and compare the odd sentence to the other sentences, in effect only half completing the task.

**Part 2** was tackled well by candidates and in general more marks were awarded in this section. This exercise tested candidates' ability to carry meaning across sentences and attention needed to be paid to the sense of the sentence as occasionally it seemed candidates did not read the whole text prior to filling in the gaps. It would have been beneficial for candidates if they had thought more carefully about the sense of the sentence and looked closely at the language which comes after "the gap" as well as that used before "the gap".

**Part 3** Some candidates did not read the instructions correctly and it seems they assumed some lines in the text were in fact correct and this lost them marks. Some candidates performed very poorly on this section, replacing words with other irrelevant lexis or correcting the correct word. It was noticed that many candidates were not able to distinguish between affect/effect. The word "rousingly" was also frequently noticed by candidates but they were unable to correct it accurately.

## Section C

**Part 1** required candidates to identify and rank in order of formality, utterances used when meeting and greeting people. This was largely accomplished well by most candidates.

**Part 2** proved more challenging on two counts: knowledge of colloquial words and ability to spell common words correctly such as 'cigarettes'. Candidates whose lexical knowledge is wide and varied performed well on this exercise. Others showed lack of familiarity with informal words such as 'aggro' and 'nagging'.

**Part 3** required candidates to understand informal sentences and rewrite parts of them in a more formal equivalent. Although the meaning of the phrases and words generally did not pose difficulties of comprehension, problem items were 'Stop stuffing your face, will you?' and 'Time for a cuppa' which some associated with soup. The re-writing aspect of this exercise differentiated among candidates as some candidates wrote rather unidiomatic formal versions.

**Part 4** primarily tested candidates' comprehension of a range of idiomatic expressions and consequently allowances were made for answers that were not entirely grammatically correct but which still showed evidence of complete

understanding. Items that proved problematic were 'The suit that I bought was a real steal.', 'I like Ken, he's always on the level with me.' and 'Ben thinks my new plasma TV fell off the back of a lorry.'

**Part 5** consisted of a formal letter which included mistakes or wrong usage for candidates to replace with the correct form. A surprising number of candidates had problems correcting 'the stopping of my credit card' and 'I do not wish to get the annual fee'. Many candidates were also unable to correct 'I look forward to hear from you'.

## Section D

The writing skills section consisted of two tasks, thus allowing the candidates a fresh start. The first task was compulsory for all candidates; the second offered a choice between two text types – a book review and a formal letter. This section of the examination served to show the different abilities of the candidates and some did not manage to achieve a pass mark.

**Part A** Some difficulties in the letter of recommendation were mainly of style and register. While the examiners accepted the fact that the tone of these letters depended considerably on the level of familiarity that the candidates imagined they had with their Director of Studies, consistency in style and register throughout the letter were expected. For example, an informal letter should have an informal salutation, contents, and signing off. Clearly, if candidates pitched their letter formally, they needed to do this throughout. In either case it was somewhat odd for candidates to recommend someone by their first name only.

**Part B** Here candidates could opt to write either a book review for a popular magazine, or a letter of complaint to a Local Council. Some who opted to write a book review mistook this for an opportunity to simply tell the story of a book they read and so failed to satisfy the requirements of a book review which should, among other things, contain a recommendation. Others had problems with style and included some inappropriate content along the lines of 'I had nothing better to do so I started to read this book.....'. Problems with style also appeared in the letter of complaint which should have been formal in tone as it was addressed to a Local Council, yet some letters came across as speech written down rather than formal writing.

Several candidates did not reach the pass mark; poor sentence structure, limited vocabulary which gave rise to inelegant paraphrasing, and unidiomatic language were the main reasons. Misspellings of common words were also an issue for some which should not be the case for those aspiring to teach the language.