

Examiners' Report of EFL March 2009 examination

A brief summary

It was gratifying to note that a good number of candidates have been well prepared for the exam. In fact, on the whole, they did best in the sections where teaching is possible prior to the exam e.g. Section A: Grammar and Phonology.

Unfortunately this is not enough to make a competent EFL teacher. Prospective candidates and their teachers need to realise that the exam not only tests knowledge of grammar; it also tests how easily they speak English and how familiar they are with the language. Candidates need to be exposed to the language in all its forms: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Our impression is that there seems to be an over-emphasis on knowledge of grammar to the detriment of the language as a whole.

Please see below a more detailed analysis of each section.

Section A

Most candidates did very well on Section A as a whole, some candidates scoring above 90%. Other candidates, especially native speakers, equated their ability to use the language with a knowledge of language terminology and therefore fared very poorly. Examination preparation courses can be very beneficial in preparing candidates for this section.

Candidates, in general, did well on Part 1. Most candidates were well-prepared regarding both grammar and lexical terminology and there were no questions that appeared to be problematic for a majority of the candidates.

Part 2 was quite problematic for many candidates. Prospective teachers should bear in mind that proper pronunciation of a word depends on its stress as stress dictates where weak forms will fall in two- or more syllable words. Candidates should remember that

- stressed syllables always include a vowel (the stressed syllable in 'sugar' cannot be sugar, for example)
- syllables are usually separated by consonants and the examination asks for the main stressed syllable so the stress in 'universe', for example, is not universe but universe
- the examiners usually include one or two words which are commonly mispronounced by Maltese speakers of English, in this case 'Arabic', which is pronounced 'Arabic' so candidates need to ensure their pronunciation of these words is standard

Most candidates did well on Part 3. As the words were thematically related, it allowed candidates to use their pre-existing knowledge of the topic, in this case weather and the environment, to answer the questions. Candidates need to pay attention to

- spelling (/ d r aʊ t / is spelt 'drought', not 'draught' or 'drou't', / r iː s aɪ k l ə b l / is spelt 'recyclable' and / əʊ z əʊ n / is spelt 'ozone')

- compound nouns ('greenhouse' is different from 'green house')
- grammatical endings of words (/ ɪ m ɪ ʃ n z / should be transcribed as 'emissions'. 'Emission' was not accepted).
- Part 4 bore very different results from candidate to candidate with some very well-prepared candidates getting all the marks and others not even attempting to do any work on this part. The examiners tried to include words that would test all the different English phonemes as well as weak forms which were especially problematic for many students. The examiners usually include words ending in 's' and/or 'ed' as words with these endings normally share phonological features.

Section B

Part 1

Overall candidates were well prepared for this section and able to recognise which sentence was the odd one out in the set. However, it was considerably more difficult for candidates to explain the reason for their choice and to clearly define their answer. Marks were awarded for accurate and clear descriptions with accurate grammatical terminology. One frequent error was the question referring to the passive voice: candidates often mistook that for the past perfect tense.

Part 2

Part two tested a variety of language in use such as prepositions, phrasal verbs and vocabulary/lexis. In general the candidates performed well; however, some answers gave away a poor level of understanding of the points listed above. Candidates made frequent errors with prepositions: for instance **there is no point OF dying now** (rather than IN dying now) and frequently, instead **of the presence of MIND**, candidates invented rather obscure answers such as the presence of Water or a torch which showed that they were not familiar with this fixed expression.

Part 3

Overall candidates were able to spot errors in spelling and grammar and correct them. It would benefit candidates to read the wording of the question carefully in this section as sometimes lines were marked as having no errors when in the instructions it was clearly stated that each line does in fact contain one mistake. It should be noted that there was also an error in the printing of this section - one of the lines had two mistakes. Candidates were not penalised and were awarded the mark whatever answer was placed in that line. If candidates did not write an answer they were also not penalised.

Section C

This section mainly tests fluency as opposed to accuracy. As a result candidates who did well in this section are the ones who speak English with a certain degree of facility;

others demonstrated an abysmal lack of knowledge of even the most ordinary idioms and basic expressions.

There were 6 parts to this section.

In Part 1, the main problems were threefold:

- Candidates used words in the answer which they'd been instructed to change
- The phrase chosen did not give the real or even approximate meaning of the original phrase
- Candidates ignored the existing pattern of the sentence so that the new phrase did not fit in grammatically.

In Part 2, it was obvious that a fair number of candidates do not know simple, informal expressions, so they re-phrased the expressions using, at times, even more formal vocabulary.

Part 3 was quite good on the whole. Candidates have obviously been taught Functions and Functional language.

In Part 4, the responses were also good on the whole.

Part 5. Register. Again teaching was obvious here and most candidates got all the answers right.

Part 6 (as in Part 2) a worrying number of candidates demonstrated an ignorance of simple spoke English, being totally unfamiliar with idiomatic expressions.

Section D

Writing a fairly long piece of prose on a given topic is, in our opinion, a good way of assessing not only a candidate's competence in the language, but could be an indicator of other qualities s/he possesses which would prove useful in the EFL classroom: e.g. creativity, inventiveness, organisational ability, to mention but a few.

In this section we had a whole spectrum, from some really good writing, to pretty pedestrian, to bad.

Marking of all the scripts was done independently by 2 examiners, and the average found at a later date. It is worth pointing out that there was considerable agreement on the part of the examiners in the marking of most of the scripts.