

GCSE

English Language (NI)

General Certificate of Secondary Education J345

OCR Report to Centres November 2015

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Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the examination.

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A631 Extended Literary Texts and Imaginative Writing: November 2015

General Comments

There was a very, very small entry for the November 2015 submission due to the change of rules for resitting examinations. As a result, there was very little variety to be seen in the texts studied and the subsequent assessments submitted.

Tasks, Texts and Responses

The central band four-six descriptor is “understands and demonstrates how meaning is conveyed”. In band three and above this is developed to include “evaluating (commenting on/ making judgements about) language and structure as appropriate” (in ways that are relevant to task and text). Such an approach would certainly be beneficial to all candidates, irrespective of their aspirations or their choice of task and text, in so far that they can write about language and structure throughout the piece: rather than focusing exclusively on the former.

Long narrative recapitulations should be avoided, as well as responses that include passages on the alleged social, historical and cultural context of the work, which is not asked for and not tested in this Unit (see below).

SECTION A – Extended Literary Text

THEMED TASKS

There were no responses to the themed tasks.

PROSE OR LITERARY NON-FICTION

John Steinbeck “Of Mice and Men”

This was the most popular question by far and there were some very good responses. Even the less impressive were still very solid and workmanlike. The best responses were able to see and demonstrate the variety of types of violence from physical and verbal to psychological. Hence, a high proportion of the candidates started with Curley’s need to prove his strength to everyone around him, with fighting the first thing on his mind. The recognition that the ranch was a very masculine environment and that the men were often impressed by other men’s strength, even if they disliked the person, characterised the very good responses. Violence was seen to underpin the world in which the men on the ranch lived: Curley’s confrontational behaviour, Lennie’s inability to understand his own strength when he finally reacts to Curley’s ruthless beating of him, when he kills Curley’s wife, the torture George faced in having to shoot Lennie, etc.

Less successful responses tended to catalogue the violent scenes and then comment on them. Generally, there was good commentary on the language but why the violence was important eluded most of the candidates at this level.

Less successful responses were also shaped rather more by perceptions of the social context than of the developed detail of the text.

To repeat again what has been said in successive Reports to Centres: references to Social/Cultural/Historical context are not sought here and are not required. They do not necessarily detract from the merits of a response but they rarely do little to enhance it. This is especially true of received, often generic comments, which tend to become clichés.

There were no responses to :

Athol Fugard “Tsotsi”

Jane Austen “Pride and Prejudice”.

Bill Bryson or Kate Adie

Hardy short stories

William Shakespeare: “Romeo and Juliet”.

William Shakespeare : “Julius Caesar”

POETRY: SELECTED POEMS

Wilfred Owen:

Only one centre chose to write about Wilfred Owen’s poetry.

Carol Ann Duffy:

Only one centre chose to write about the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy.

There were no responses to:

Benjamin Zephaniah

Simon Armitage

SECTION B – IMAGINATIVE WRITING

Personal and Imaginative Writing/Prose Fiction

Both ‘A Clash of Loyalties’ and ‘Under Pressure’ proved to be very accessible tasks, with the majority of candidates choosing the latter. It was pleasing to see that most, if not all, tried very hard to create a sense of tension, as the title implies, and as a result there were some excellent responses. All the satellite tasks were popular. The newspaper article was the most popular choice for both tasks and the most successful, as the diary entry often succumbed to being just another story. Surprisingly, the least successful was the autobiography extract. This genre was not always fully understood by candidates who attempted it.

It was, however, surprising to see, the brevity of a number of pieces for the satellite task. Both the main task and the satellite task have equal weighting with regards to marks and in a number of instances it was disappointing to see a cursory attempt at the satellite task after a valiant effort at the main task.

Centres and teachers are to be congratulated on steering candidates in directions that often displayed compassion, sympathy and awe in convincing and authentic detail.

Good tests of the merit of a candidate’s writing are often:

- The degree of control there has been in shaping and developing the chosen (raw) material of the piece: is this greater or lesser than the sum of its parts? How completely integrated are its different (and quite possibly disparate) elements?
- The range and appropriateness of the vocabulary: is it apt, precise, well separated and lacking repetition?

Finally, the centres and candidates who did submit work for this session are again to be congratulated on the freshness, originality and enthusiasm which characterised much of the work that was read.

Administrative Matters

It was pleasing to see that very few centres were late in submitting moderation samples and that many more were pleasingly prompt.

However, it was disappointing to find a bigger discrepancy in the presentation of the work for this submission as opposed to the work submitted for June 2015. There was a paucity of annotation on scripts to show exactly where and how marks had been awarded than there had been in the summer.

The recording of marks for the writing tasks, ie the separate marks for the different AOs for each piece, was not carried out as well for this session as in the previous session. Marks were not broken down and centres just offered a total for the moderator to make a judgement on.

It is important that centres are diligent when it comes to the administration of controlled assessments. For such a small entry of centres there has been a startling increase in the number of clerical errors made by centres this session, suggesting that submissions had been done in a rush. OCR asks for your co-operation in eliminating this, in the interest of all candidates.

A632 Speaking, listening and spoken language

General comments

A small number of centres were entered for this November session, but moderators saw a reasonable range of tasks.

Administration

In the vast majority of cases, Centres managed the administration of this component very efficiently sending the work samples promptly and presenting them clearly. Moderators were appreciative of Centres who included transcripts of the texts which had been studied and the notes which candidates used during the final assessment. It is of great help to the moderator when the CAFs are completed fully, with the candidate number and when, after internal standardisation, the final mark awarded is clear.

Task setting and contextualisation

For all topics, it was very clear that candidates responded more successfully when the task was clearly defined, rather than specified simply as "A Study of ...". Particularly successful were tasks which encouraged candidates to look at how language is used for a particular purpose. For example, candidates asked to consider how Boris Johnson developed rapport with the audience in his Olympic speech were able to closely consider how he interacted with the audience through humour and a shared sense of pride. The task required them to look closely at his lexical choices but also his mode of delivery and his rapport with his audience achieved through pace, body language and facial expression.

Considering the styles of various children's television presenters often resulted in candidates comparing, for example, the range of vocabulary, tone of voice and style of communication in programmes from different times, the 1960s and 1980s, for example. Some responses were rather descriptive and lacked close reference to a particular transcript or episode, instead looking generally at a particular series like Newsround. At times there was too much focus on how a presenter looked or dressed; unless linked closely to their language presentation, such observations are unlikely to be relevant.

Some Centres chose to compare texts and while this is not a requirement of this component, it can be helpful to candidates in illuminating the choices made. In some cases this was successful, often where able candidates had a secure and at times subtle understanding of the varying contexts, for example, Boris Johnson making a formal speech and his appearance in an interview.

A small number of centres entered tasks set for 2016. Centres are reminded that they are responsible for setting the tasks appropriate for the year of entry.

Characteristics of weaker and stronger responses

The most successful responses were those where candidates had a good understanding of the contexts and purposes of the texts and were therefore able to consider how language had been chosen to meet these purposes. They were able to comment precisely on the effects of particular language choices and how they achieved the purpose. For example, some commented on Johnson's self-mockery in his speeches, making him endearing to the audience.

Successful candidates also showed an understanding of the structure of texts, particularly when dealing with longer speeches, how they progressed towards a conclusion and how language choices varied accordingly.

Where tasks lacked clear focus, candidates were more likely to adopt a 'feature spotting' approach where examples of devices, typically lists of three, anaphora, figurative language, or closed and open questions etc. were listed. Because candidates were then dealing with a group of examples, often from different parts of a text, their opportunity to comment analytically and sensitively on the choice of language was restricted and their points were consequently often superficial and repetitive. These responses tended to lack an 'overview' of the text therefore demonstrating limited understanding.

Application of the marking criteria

Where moderators disagreed with Centre marks, the most common disparity was in what constituted 'analytical understanding', perception or cogency. In these instances, simple or descriptive comments with a straightforward example were often praised as 'shows analytical understanding'.

A633 Information and ideas (Foundation Tier)

General Comments

The question paper proved to be accessible and of an appropriate level of demand for the tier. Most candidates were able to engage with the two reading texts for Section A: a website report on a 64-year-old American's record-winning swim and a leaflet from the Help the Aged charity.

The format of the answer booklet helped the majority of candidates to gauge an appropriate length for their answers. However, a minority of candidates tried unnecessarily to cram too many words into the spaces provided for Questions 1a – 1c. Some candidates wrote excessively for Question 2a.

There was some evidence in a minority of scripts that candidates had rushed their responses to the Reading questions and then spent an excessive amount of time on the Writing section. This led many of these candidates to write excessively long answers to their chosen Writing question, where quantity was prioritised over quality of response.

Individual Questions Section A – Reading

1(a) – 1(c) These easier questions provided a relatively gentle way in to the paper, though not all candidates scored all 6 marks. Some candidates, for example, found difficulty in identifying with sufficient clarity one or more facts in Question 1a.

1(d) Stronger responses demonstrated a clear focus on the task, clearly outlining both the difficulties Diana Nyad faced during her swim and also what she achieved from her swim. The best responses made a clear differentiation between the difficulties and achievements. Responses in the middle of the range tended to list points mechanically, without achieving a clear focus on the question.

Once again, less successful responses were often marked by the presence of one or more of the following:

- points made that were not relevant to the task
- points laboured or repeated
- significant lifting of material with only the occasional word changed in an unconvincing attempt at own words.
- The very weakest answers lifted material indiscriminately and showed a misunderstanding of the task and/or text.

Question 2

The majority of candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. This enabled them to write answers of an appropriate length.

2(a) Stronger responses commented on the precise effect of such features as the logo with the sun symbolising a happier future for the elderly if people made donations to the charity. The effectiveness of the two photographs in appealing to the emotions of readers was also noted. Candidates noted the gloominess of the black and white photograph of the old woman seated by the window which physically separated her from the rest of the world going about its business. The picture of the locket with its fading photographs hinted at the happier past the old woman

had enjoyed, contrasting it with her current loneliness. Candidates also noted the emotive use of language ('Jean has known nothing but loneliness') and direct appeal to the reader ('Please give £12 to show her you care.').

The least successful responses (in a minority) merely identified features without comment or made generic comments about headings, photographs and logos that could be true of many media texts.

2(b) The most successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to select and analyse relevant detail, commenting on both the information given and the effects of specific words and phrases. It should be noted, as always, that quality of analytical comment is a discriminator in this question.

The strongest responses commented on the cumulative effect of the detail used in conveying Jean's life in a small flat on her own, deserted by her neighbours and unable to cope with basic things such as getting on the bus or doing her shopping. These responses tended to make the point that the plight of Jean was being used to illustrate a much wider problem ('More than a million older people in the UK are acutely isolated').

Most responses at least attempted to explore the effects of words in helping to shape the reader's response to this leaflet, and the more successful responses showed a sound understanding of the text's purpose. The strongest responses looked closely at the effects of emotive language ('feeling lonely and forgotten', 'frail and isolated', 'suffer in silence') and direct appeals to the reader's sympathy or, as some argued, guilt ('with the generosity of supporters like you'). A few candidates wondered whether Jean actually existed.

Generally, there was less evidence this session of feature-spotting, where candidates list without comment examples of alliteration, metaphor and the rule of three.

The weakest responses simply described the content of the passage, showing considerable uncertainty about the requirements of the question.

Section B – Writing Questions 3 and 4

It is worth pointing out to centres preparing their learners for the June 2016 exam that length of answer alone rarely secures high reward. There is no need for candidates to write more than one-and-a-half to two sides of writing (using average size of handwriting as a guide) for their response to their chosen question in Section B. There should certainly be no need to use the additional pages of the answer booklet. Many candidates would have benefited from more practice at developing the quality of their writing. Those candidates who score highly recognise, among other things, the importance of planning, paragraphing and checking their work.

As ever, stronger responses showed a clear control of generally relevant material, and offered an engaging opening, clear development of ideas and an effective ending. Both vocabulary and sentence structures were varied for effect. The weakest responses tended to produce rambling material or material lacking coherence to the degree that it had to be re-read, sometimes several times, before the meaning was sufficiently clear.

Common and recurring problems with punctuation were the same ones listed in previous reports: confusion between upper and lower case letters and a failure to mark sentence divisions. More noticeable this session were difficulties candidates had marking apostrophes of both omission and possession.

Question 3

Predictably enough for an assessment aimed largely at 16-year-olds there was some sense that

old age was thought to begin in one's early twenties.

The strongest responses presented convincing arguments about ways in which young people could benefit from the experience of, usually, their parents and grandparents who had lived through more challenging times (it was generally argued) than younger people. Older people could, for example, help with the adult world of getting a job, getting a mortgage and managing money. Many candidates argued that older people also had a lot to learn from younger people, not least in accessing the internet or using a smartphone or tablet. The older people had, after all, it was sometimes lamented, been brought up watching small television sets with only a couple of channels showing programmes in only black and white. A minority of candidates pointed out that not all older people were suitable role models, citing excessive consumption of cigarettes and alcohol.

Question 4

The strongest responses remembered the audience, purpose and format of writing specified in the question, and crafted their responses accordingly. This meant that there was a clear sense of a speech given in the formal context of a classroom. Most candidates spoke knowledgeably and eloquently about the dire effects of unhealthy diets and inadequate exercise, giving suitable examples to support their arguments. There was much effective use of rhetorical devices that captured a tone appropriate both to audience and purpose.

There were, however, two examples of writing that sometimes detracted from the effectiveness of arguments. The use of spurious statistics (often relating to 'surveys' actually conducted by the candidate, or so it was claimed) did not always help to advance a convincing case. The use of somewhat contrived linguistic flourishes occasionally led to faltering notes in the writing.

A633 Information and ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments:

The majority of candidates had been prepared rigorously for this re-take session and even more were prepared to give it their best to improve the grades they had been awarded in the summer session. The vast majority of the work fell into a range of 35-45 marks out of the total of 80, straddling the C/D borderline and representing work in Bands 3, 4 & 5. A smaller but still significant number of candidates produced much higher order work and there was much to commend and enjoy in strong A grade papers.

Equally there was a smaller number of entrants who may have been better placed in the Foundation Tier or in Functional Skills English, where there is a clearer framework for what is required.

Very few candidates achieve less than Band 5 in their writing but many more do so in reading because those skills are less well developed.

The paper worked well and was very comparable in the level of challenge and outcome to both the papers set in November 2014 and June 2015. Phoebe Doyle's polemic on the ills of School PE struck a chord with many and Alan Carr was a well-known personality to the vast majority.

Comments on Individual Questions:

Question 1

Many candidates could improve their performance on all the reading questions and especially this one.

Is the focus on competitive sports killing PE for those who aren't "good enough"?

Outline concisely the key points of Phoebe Doyle's objections to the PE teaching she experienced in School.

Strong responses to this focused, as the task requests, on Phoebe Doyle's experiences of School: not her subsequent engagement with fitness and exercise.

There was much to say and the best answers did so with concision and effective use of own words. Remember that the skills looked for here are those of selection and reorganisation: if the candidate's vocabulary subsumes the language of the passage that is fine. Synonym recall is not being tested. Answers saw that in addition to the physical discomfort, the humiliating treatment of the weak by the strong, the consequent deceit and fabrication and the sheer dread of failure there were bigger issues. There was no theory offered; the emphasis on team games and competition was very divisive; this led to elitism and elitist attitudes in which the minority were favoured, and so on.

Middle range answers saw the former, rather more personal points but fewer of the latter, bigger ones. They often added on irrelevant material about Phoebe Doyle's adult exercise habits and her aspirations for her daughter. Sometimes there was a range of points but put into a far bigger word count than the original. Both irrelevance, excess and verbosity count against a bare count of the points and may restrict a response to a lower band than concision and sparseness may have qualified it for.

Weaker answers struggled to select appropriate elements of the passage and failed to re-organise them suitably. Some simply lifted or copied chunks of the passage, the weakest ones using the first person narrative voice, an obvious give-away. Other candidates still confuse the skills required for this task with those required for questions 2 & 3. Such responses gain very few marks, if any.

Answers that had been planned before the commencement of the response were invariably the more successful.

Question 2

How does Phoebe Doyle try to persuade us of involving all children in PE?

There were two broad avenues to explore here: firstly what is implied in the way she structures and composes the diatribe against her experience of School PE (basically that it was competitive and therefore divisive and therefore a failure) and the brave new world she has discovered of the benefits of personal training, exercise and fitness which is not team orientated and therefore non-competitive and therefore (she argues) a success. And therefore they should be the constituent parts of a reformed School PE curriculum.

The first, therefore, required candidates to go back over the material they had covered in Q1 and look at HOW it is expressed: and then go on to do the same with the latter. Examiners had to make the assumption that in the first case “involving all children in PE” was implied by the candidate where it was not openly stated: which was a frequent experience.

Many candidates worked well on aspects of the presentation: picking up the specious moral relativity implied by ‘aren’t “good enough”?’ was the first stop, followed by a consideration of the structural support given by the juxtaposition of the sub-headings. There was much to say about the first photograph, which was universally linked with one or more aspect/s of the text denoting exclusion, humiliation etc. The last photograph was also popular prompting analysis of contrast and support for PD’s conclusion. It was a shame that fewer candidates did not take a more constructively critical view of the age of the participants and link that back to the latter stages of the argument.

There was much for all candidates to investigate in the text: it is freighted down with emotive language, both positive and negative. The “hated/dreaded/rubbish/was rubbish” all invited attention. The use of the word “regime” was analysed by stronger candidates who scored heavily when they saw this was a summative account of PD’s view of School PE. The repetition of “useless” now in a new context with the violence of “slapped” was a popular choice for comment as was “take zero credit”.

Many more candidates tried to do something with the colloquialisms in the first section than (for example) the self-conscious deprecation of her running abilities in the same vein at the top of page 3. Neither were the lapses into self-indulgent sentimentality as she tries to make a general argument from the particularities of her daughter’s “loves/skips/scoots” much considered. One wonders how the Doyle regime would react if the child were a secret smoker playing full back for the hockey team.

In fact the passage is less formal throughout than some candidates expected or wanted it to be.

However often we try and guide candidates away from it there is still far too widespread a habit of seeking to answer both reading questions by device spotting. The more ludicrous examples of this were on the second passage but even here there were allegations not just of unidentified metaphor and oxymoron but asyndeton and even polysyndeton when reference to “listing” would have served the purpose equally well. All I can repeat is that this brings candidates very little if

any reward. It also elongates answers significantly precluding time, which might have been better spent on a thorough reading of the second passage.

Question 3

How does Alan Carr present his childhood memories in a thoughtful and amusing way?

A clear distinction picked up by all examiners was the difference in the quality of answers where the passage had been thoroughly read and pondered and where the attention paid it had been negligible or perfunctory. Candidates who are in too much of a hurry with this task throw marks away.

Nor was it necessarily an advantage to have been familiar with either Graham or Alan Carr, as this sometimes invited candidates down a path of irrelevance when commenting, for example, about the latter's TV presenting skills.

More problematically too many otherwise capable candidates failed to follow the steer in the question: "thoughtful" (aka serious) and "amusing" (aka funny). On the other hand this structure provided a very fruitful way into the task for those who saw and went with it. They talked very capably, for example about the juxtaposition of resentment and sarcasm, which produces a sardonic tone and overview throughout.

On the serious note some very perceptive candidates talked about Carr senior with some sympathy, a Dad who didn't deserve this mauling for simply trying to support his recalcitrant, cynical son. The strongest candidates also went to town in analysing not just the sarcasm used but also its shades and the way the structure of the piece reinforces its effects. For example the repetition of "arthritis" which crosses a paragraph division and ends in an abruptly ironic rhetorical question "prevention, anyone?" was rightly seen as a crux in the passage's structure and an example of AC being unfair to his father, or, at any rate, thoughtfully serious as well as very witty.

Some candidates found difficulty in finding anything that actually amused them and were forced into assertion and speculation about what that might have been. Others tended to ignore thoughtful and go for allegedly comic examples from the piece.

There was a plethora of device spotting in this question, some of it ridiculous, most very limiting to the candidate's mark.

Remarking on the repetition of "tree" in the first paragraph is perfectly acceptable, so long as the effects are noted. However, the bald statement that "spectacle wearer" and "puppy fat" are "ironic" hilarious *per se* could not be credited. Ascribing "29 minutes, 38 seconds" to a "use of statistics" is device spotting at its least productive. The whole point of the "nutritious in-flight meal" was missed and written down as a simile or a metaphor without explanation.

There is still far too much reliance from a few candidates in spotting personal pronouns and attempting to make too much of them.

Question 4

Write an entry for a personal diary or blog where you explore your thoughts about the expectations others have of you.

This was a very popular choice of writing topic: both versions of the genre are ones candidates are very familiar with and confident in. There were some fascinating accounts of the pressures parents and friends unwittingly put on individuals and accounts of prodigious sporting ability and the massive amount of training imposed on young people to develop this were breath-taking.

Many candidates wrote about the agonies of parental expectation with regard academic results, careers and university entrance in a sympathetic and tolerant way “I know they only want the best for me, but....”.

Some accounts were more personal and often ended with a resounding declaration of personal integrity and independence, no matter what.

Candidates always benefit from planning their work whichever topic they choose: this has many benefits, especially to the shape and structure of the essay; its concision, sharpness of expression and focus on the task and continuity.

Question 5

“There’s no point if there’s no challenge.”

Write your views on this statement

The task was developed in a wide variety of styles and genres. Some candidates chose exemplification as a means of agreeing with the prompt, giving accounts of herculean efforts in mountain climbing, jungle trekking and a host of different sporting activities. Some, closer to home, wrote movingly of struggles to stop families from falling apart or working at reconciliation when they had done so. Others gave harrowing accounts of looking after dying grandparents or other close family members.

A different tack was to start with a robust “I disagree” or “the statement is rubbish” and then go on to explore/explain the reasons for that leading, in the case of abler candidates to a philosophical approach and resolution. Weaker candidates often started taking one point of view but changing their minds as they thought more about it, or, in the case of the weaker ones, struggled for things to say, and ran out of consistent ideas.

Some candidates simply sat on the fence and gave a “yes/well no” style response.

Some candidates at the top end were able to demonstrate maturity, sophistication and flair in their work and gave examiners much pleasure in what they produced. At the bottom end of the range in this tier there is very rarely a shortage of ideas or things to say: rather severe weaknesses in the ways of saying them. Too many candidates (even if that is a small number) are very slapdash about handwriting and give examiners real problems in deciphering what they are trying to express. The basic rules of grammar and syntax are sometimes ignored. A frequent example in this session was wildly variant tense disagreements.

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