Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (English Language) 2008

Assessment Report

Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is to consolidate the Chief Examiners' observations on the performance of candidates who sat the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (English Language) in 2008.

General Observations

2. Candidates achieved different proficiency attainment* rates in different papers. The attainment rates for individual papers were: Reading 81.8%; Writing 42%; Listening 71.8%; Speaking 62%; Classroom Language Assessment 94.6%.

Paper 1 (Reading)

3. About four-fifths of the cohort achieved the benchmark level in this paper, in line with the performance of earlier cohorts. Paper 1 results have been steady for the past several years.

4. This year the paper included three reading passages, with a number of multiple choice items included in the questions for each passage (rather than in a separate cloze section, which was the practice in previous years). Most candidates completed the questions for all three reading passages, although there was evidence that some candidates had not been able to manage their time so as to tackle all questions. The tendency was for most unanswered questions to occur in the second or third passages.

5. Candidates performed well on questions asking for direct information from the passage. They also performed reasonably well on questions asking for reference to earlier information, for example, in passage A, question 7 'On line 17, "their employment". Whose employment?' where the answer is 'The ALTs'.

6. The multiple choice questions were handled reasonably well. However, only just under half of the candidature correctly gave 'said something extreme' as the meaning of 'went so far as to' (passage A question 4). Candidates were more successful at identifying the meaning of 'Next door but two or three to Mr Tsang was a tiny shop' as 'the shop was near' (passage C question 34).

7. Candidates performed less well where they were required to draw an overall conclusion or infer from the information in a passage, for example in passage C question 41. This question asked which of the adults 'used their authority

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as an adult in a relaxed way'. Many candidates said 'his mother', ignoring the information in the passage that said that he had been 'roundly chastised and stripped of his pocket money for a week'. Candidates who responded wrongly may have mistaken *the writer's view* that his mother didn't truly disapprove with *the fact* of her use of authority as described in the passage. While Mr Tsang was a 'friend' of the author, there is no information in the passage about Mr Tsang's use of authority. The shop owner, as the seller of the cherry bombs and the person who could control their use, is relaxed in his authority, as demonstrated in the way he lets the writer 'try out' the cherry bomb even though there are people (e.g. the coolie) passing by.

8. Similarly, candidates had difficulty in identifying the writer's intention in mentioning that Porcaro's career predated the JET programme (passage A question 18); this was to give credibility to Porcaro's point of view. Candidates also performed relatively poorly where they needed to identify which of the two people referred to in the passage would agree with particular statements (passage A question 20). To answer this question, readers had to understand *the points of view as revealed in the information* in the passages, rather than simply locate the answer in the information itself.

9. There was some evidence that candidates had simply copied out portions of the passage without reading the question carefully to understand exactly what information was required. In passage A question 16, for example, some candidates wrote 'breaking down barriers' in response to 'What did Philip Harper need to overcome?' The answer called for by the syntax of the question is 'barriers in the world of sake making'. Again, while most candidates were able to identify the metaphor 'factory floor' called for in question 21 of passage B, weaker candidates copied out the entire section; markers were thus unable to identify whether the metaphor had been recognised and no mark was awarded.

10. Advice to candidates

    10.1 Plan your time so as to ensure that you can tackle all parts of the paper. Note that the number of questions for each passage and the lengths of the passages may differ.

    10.2 As you read each passage, consider the author's point of view, different opinions, if any, being expressed and implications suggested in the writing. Remember that questions are unlikely to ask only about factual information in the passages. Some will ask you to draw inferences from the information or to indicate an understanding of the points of view being expressed or the intention of the writer.

    10.3 Take time to read through the questions for a passage to get a sense of the material being questioned and, in some cases, the relationship between questions.

    10.4 Read individual questions with care. Markers for this paper noted that some responses suggested that the question had been

misunderstood; for example in passage A question 5 where the question was about how 'money would be found' rather than about how the JET scheme was funded.

10.5 Avoid copying out long excerpts from the passage in the hope that the answer will be contained somewhere within the chunk. Markers look for a response appropriate to the question being asked.

10.6 Remember that in this paper the number of marks for each question corresponds to the number of responses required. If a particular question has three marks, the response will need to include three parts or elements in order to attract those three marks.

10.7 Remember that only the first answer given will be marked. Do not write a list of information in the hope that answers will be found within it; such lists are unlikely to result in the award of marks because wrong responses may precede correct ones.

10.8 To enhance reading comprehension, review your understanding of complex sentence patterns and meaningful links between sentences and paragraphs. For example in this paper, passage B question 22, 'in the early stage of what?' the answer is not simply 'the world style scene'. It would not make sense to refer to 'the early stage of a world style scene'. To find the answer it is necessary to refer to the previous information about China's repositioning of itself. The question is asking 'the early stage of *doing* what' and the answer is 'of *repositioning* itself, or *being recognized*, or *entering* the world style scene'.

10.9 Read as much as you can, across a range of genres, to continue to enhance your all-round English proficiency. Become familiar with different styles of writing and with the expression of opinions and points of view in written material.

Paper 2 (Writing)

11. This paper consists of two parts, Part 1: Task1, Composition, and Part 2: Tasks 2A & 2B, Correcting and Explaining Errors/Problems in a Student's Composition. The paper, as well as the scales of performance on which candidates are tested, was slightly revised this year.

Part 1: Composition

12. In Part 1 of the paper, candidates may be required to write various text types, and the one chosen for the 2008 round was a school graduation speech. The topic (making a contribution) was felt by markers to be appropriate in terms of content and level of difficulty. The two-part task (discussing the importance of contributing to the community and describing someone who helps others) was straightforward.

13. Many candidates demonstrated that they were able to complete the task successfully and produced a coherent, balanced text of high quality. However, some candidates copied large portions from the given text while others produced clichéd and formulaic expressions. A number of scripts focused on *contribution* instead of *its importance*, and a few described helpful *organisations* rather than a particular *person*.

14. The three scales for Part 1 are (1) Organisation and Coherence, (2) Grammatical and Lexical Accuracy and Range and (3) Task Completion. As in previous administrations, scale two proved most challenging; grammatical problems were common and detracted from otherwise acceptable writing. Common problem areas included:

- incomplete sentences or faulty sentence structures, e.g. "Good values have to be passed from generation to generation…. <u>So</u> that we can go on…"; "There are few questions pop[p]ed up in my head"; "Remembering every little contribution do count"

- incorrect verbs and formation of adjectives, e.g. "Being a teacher is… to <u>foster our students</u> to be <u>a</u> contribu<u>tive person</u> in the society"; "to have more <u>talentive</u> people"

- wrong tense and formation of tense, e.g. "After years of studying, you <u>gain</u> a lot from your school"; "Why you have good environment when you born<u>ed</u>?"

- subject-verb disagreement, e.g. "help the people who need<u>s</u> help"; "you seem<u>s</u>"; "there <u>is</u> a lot of valuable customs"

- confusing word pairs, e.g. "and" vs "or"; "it" vs "this"; and "at last" vs "lastly"

- misspelling, e.g. "gentlement"; "wheather"; "phenoman"; "explaination"; "nuture", "excute"; "enery"; "enegry"; "everday"; "congraduate"

- clause construction influenced by Chinese, e.g. "he talking something"; "let yourself become a busy man"

- inappropriate, formulaic ending to the speech, e.g. "This is the end of my presentation".

Part 2: Correcting and explaining errors/problems

15. Part 2 of the Writing Paper is divided into two parts: Task A, correcting errors/problems and Task B, explaining errors/problems. This year, two changes were introduced to Part 2: the items tested in the two parts were drawn from different parts of the same student text, meaning that different items were corrected and explained; and, in Task 2B, candidates were given incomplete grammatical explanations which had to be completed with a suitable word or phrase.

16. Markers felt that the instructions for Part 2 were clearly stated and the level was appropriate for upper primary and lower secondary teachers of English in a Hong Kong school.

17. As in previous rounds of LPATE, many candidates did satisfactorily in Task A but were less successful in Task B, suggesting that their ability to correct simple errors of English usage is acceptable but that they do not have the necessary metalanguage to be able to classify errors, nor explain their causes and solutions. Here are some examples of problematic 2B answers:

   Item 13: "'but' is an *adverb* to show *comparison*"
   Item 14: "the 'driving' in 'legal driving' is *present continuous tense*"
   Item 15: "'people' is an *object* or *verb*"
   Item 17: "'cuter' is a *superlative*"
   Item 18: "'dead' is a *noun*"; "'dead' is an *infinitive*"
   Item 19: "'advises' is *adjectives*"

18. The new format of Task 2B means that candidates must take extra care to insert in the blanks correctly-spelt words/phrases/clauses to make the whole sentence logical and grammatically appropriate. The terminology used must be precise enough to explain the error in the context of the student text. The following are four examples of unacceptably vague answers (with the correct answers in brackets):

   ● "dead" - a *word*; (should be 'an adjective')
   ● "a" - an *article*; (should be 'an indefinite article')
   ● "would" - a *verb*; (should be 'a modal verb')
   ● "cuter" - an *adjective* (should be 'a comparative [adjective]').

19. Below are explanations for some common wrong answers in Task 2B.

   ● Lack of meta-language
      E.g. item 18(d)
      "ice is uncountable" – 0 marks
      "ice is an uncountable noun" – 1 mark
      (candidates are required to demonstrate that they know that countability is a property of nouns)

   ● Unclear pronouns
      E.g. item 18(d)
      "it is uncountable" – 0 marks
      (it is not clear what the pronoun "it" refers to)

   ● Selecting the wrong semantic explanation
      E.g. item 16(b):
      "the 'can' in 'Chinese people have more money and they can go everywhere' indicates the people's _____ to travel".
      There are many meanings of the verb 'can', including permission, willingness and ability, and not all are suitable for the context of item

16(b). Candidates need to select the correct explanation (ability) to get the mark.

- Misunderstanding of the first conditional
  Item 20(b): candidates were asked about the incorrect sentence *If we do not do this, we would all die soon*. If 'would' is corrected to 'will', "this kind of sentence tells us about _____". Since this is a first conditional sentence, the answer is simply "what will probably happen in the future". However, many different answers were given, ranging from the absolute ("what will happen" / "truth or fact") to the uncertain ("possible result" / "assumption" / "something may happen").

- Confusion over the third person singular verb form
  Item 19(b): The verb 'advises' in *My teacher advises us to save energy* "is in the _____ form to agree with the subject 'My teacher'." The answer should be 'third person singular', but many candidates thought that 'advises' was in plural form here, not realising that tense does not explain agreement between the subject and the verb.

- Misspelling
  Misspelling was quite common, e.g. "oppocite"; "conjucton"; "to infinite"; "adjacetive"; "compliment"; "unaccountable noun"; "pural form".

20. The problems described above reveal the need for candidates to strengthen their foundation in English language vocabulary and structures, as well as common linguistic terminology, and to spend time proofreading their answers during the assessment.

Paper 3 (Listening)

21. In 2007, the LPAT English Language adopted revised specifications. One change to the Listening paper is that the number of texts has increased from one to three. This is considered a significant improvement as the use of more and shorter texts is likely to reduce threats to validity posed by candidate familiarity (or lack of it) with the listening topic.

22. The titles of the three texts were (i) Technology for the people (ii) How seriously should we take *feng shui*? and (iii) Gypsy children and education. The texts were adapted from authentic documentaries and interviews in media programmes.

23. A variety of speaker roles and voices were used in the recording, including three journalists (hosts of the programmes), male and female computer researchers, male and female *feng shui* practitioners or adherents, a female *feng shui* sceptic and a female sociologist. The recording of the texts was natural, and language was delivered at a natural, normal speed in standard native-speaking and non-native speaking (i.e. Cantonese) accents.

24. A wide variety of task types were included in this paper. These included diagram completion, blank-filling, table-completion, cloze, multiple choice and open-ended questions. These allowed for the testing of a variety of listening skills. Items were constructed in such a way that candidates were asked to retrieve and interpret messages in the aural text rather drawing unduly upon world knowledge.

25. As in many listening comprehension tests, grammar and spelling mistakes in candidates' answers were not penalised. However, if there were grave errors which hindered communication or distorted meanings, marks were not awarded.

26. The paper consisted of 37 questions, giving 60 test items. The facility indices (percentage correct) of these items ranged from 96% (the easiest item) to 20% (the most difficult item), and almost all items were able to discriminate between high-scoring and low-scoring candidates.

27. Listening to numbers
Last year's Chief Examiner's report observed that candidates' performance in listening to numbers seemed to have improved. This year's paper included a relatively challenging listening-to-numbers MC item, question 28. This item was rather difficult because it required that the candidates, on hearing the sociologist's report of some numbers about Gypsies, synthesise these figures to infer the best estimate of the total Gypsies population in 2005. I am pleased to report that candidates in general performed quite well on this item, with 53% of candidates answering it correctly.

28. Based on a review of the weaker candidates' performance this year, I would like to make the following observations for future improvement:

28.1 Concept and exemplification of concept

An important comprehension skill is differentiating an example from the concept the example illustrates. This is a skill which some weaker candidates lacked, however. An example of this is question 15b, for which candidates were asked to write down Robert's suggestion about what can be done about Hong Kong's pollution problem. The correct answer is that Robert suggests proper city planning.

> Robert: …you know, in the past, in China they built towers outside a town, which were apparently of no functional use. These were all Feng Shui towers that would help to change the fortune and then the environment of the city or the town … so proper city planning is of use in terms of Feng Shui.

Some candidates, however, wrote "Robert suggested building Feng Shui towers". This indicates that these candidates failed to distinguish the concept from the example the speaker used to explain the concept.

28.2 Modality and hedging in speech

Only a quarter of the candidates responded correctly to question 3. The question required that the candidate retrieve the purpose of the exhibition of new technologies, which Dale Williams visited in Seattle. This is what Jeff said:

> Jeff: …… All of the things we have in this space are meant to demonstrate how we can think differently about what the future might be.

Quite a large percentage of the candidates put down "to show how different the future will be", suggesting that they failed to notice that (i) that Jeff's emphasis was on people's different ways of thinking rather than on the future; and (ii) Jeff hedged in his expression (using 'might') to show his tentativeness.

28.3 Function words such as pronouns and determiners

There is little doubt that knowledge of 'content' words helps to enhance comprehension, but successful advanced listening also requires that a candidate also attend to function (grammatical) words such as prepositions, determiners and pronouns.

Question 17 asked: 'According to Robert, what is the scientific explanation for why having a fish tank in the home can help people earn more money?' As can be seen from the following extract, according to Robert, there is no scientific explanation for this:

> Robert: There is no scientific explanation for that, but there are *some* scientific explanations, for example, if you have a room that has no windows, Feng Shui it says it's bad.

The function word 'some' in the recording was emphasized by Robert, suggesting that at this point Robert was referring to explanations which were given for some other phenomena. However, apparently quite a number of weaker candidates failed to recognize the intended meaning of this function word. They gave such answers as "a room has no windows is not good".

29. In light of the above comments, future candidates are advised to:

29.1 Listen to a range of English language materials so as to gain exposure to different accents and varieties of English, as well as a range of text types.

29.2 Practise identifying key rhetorical functions such as exemplification.

29.3 Enhance their awareness of the attitude speakers convey in their speech, and how this is done, with particular reference to modality, such as expressions of certainty and probability.

Paper 4 (Speaking)

30. This paper consists of two parts. There are two tasks in Part 1, Task 1A: Reading Aloud a Prose Passage and Task 1B: Recounting an Experience/Presenting Arguments; and one task in Part 2, Group Interaction.

31. Candidates are tested on six scales of performance: (1) Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation; (2) Reading Aloud with Meaning; (3) Grammatical and Lexical Accuracy and Range; (4) Organisation and Cohesion; (5) Interacting with Peers; and (6) Discussing Educational Matters with Peers.

32. The proficiency attainment rate of the 1285 candidates who attempted this paper was 62%.

Part 1: Task 1A Reading Aloud a Prose Passage

33. In this task, candidates are assessed on two criteria, 'Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation' and 'Reading Aloud with Meaning'. The passage chosen allowed them the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to convey meaning in such a way that students would be able to understand it. The passages contained narration, dialogue/conversation and description and were slightly longer than in previous years to compensate for the fact that there is now (from 2008 onwards) no poem to read aloud.

34. Candidates generally performed quite well in this task and the majority were able to make themselves understood. The major weaknesses were the pronunciation of unfamiliar words and the use of stress and intonation to form sense groups and convey meaning. It is recommended that prospective candidates spend time reading suitable English texts and listening to the ways that such texts are read aloud by competent speakers. Candidates also need to think more about the audience that they are meant to be speaking to, i.e. a class of students, and try to project the meaning of the passage to that audience through appropriate stress and phrasing, without being overly dramatic.

Part 1: Task 1B Recounting an Experience/Presenting Arguments

35. In this task, candidates are assessed on two criteria, 'Grammatical and Lexical Accuracy and Range' and 'Organisation and Cohesion'. In general, most candidates were able to talk on the given topic for the time required. However, a small minority of candidates appeared to be reading from a 'script' that they had prepared during the preparation time. Such candidates were marked down for this as the assessors usually found that, once the candidate had completed their 'reading', they had nothing else to say, or what they did say either repeated what they had said already or even contradicted it, making the whole talk incoherent.

36. Candidates are advised to make brief notes during the preparation time and to work from these, so that their talk has a clear structure and is relevant to the topic. Candidates should try to present different aspects of the topic to demonstrate to the assessors that they are able to organise their thoughts and present them coherently. Candidates should talk for about 2 minutes and will be told by the assessors when to stop their presentation.

37. Assessors also found that many candidates demonstrated poor control of grammatical structures and a limited range of vocabulary and so were unable to make their meaning clear to the assessors. They also used many constructions which were more suited to writing than speech, and many were overly formal. Candidates should think about what type of presentation they are making and therefore about the kinds of structures that they need to use and the ways in which their ideas should be organised. For example, when recounting an experience, past tenses (simple past, past perfect, past continuous) should be used. Also, ideas will need to be sequenced such that the whole talk is coherent; this sequencing may be chronological or ideational and need not be explicitly signalled (with 'also', for example). Candidates should practise speaking on a range of topics with different purposes and audiences to become more familiar with this kind of language use activity.

Part 2: Group Interaction

38. In Part 2 of the paper, candidates discuss an education-related topic or situation (not a student's essay, as in previous years) and are assessed on the criteria of 'Interacting with Peers' and 'Discussing Educational Matters with Peers'.

39. Candidates were able to make use of conversational strategies such as expressing opinions, agreeing/disagreeing with others, interrupting, clarifying and asking for clarification; hence, on the whole they did quite well on the criterion of 'Interacting with Peers'. It is important that candidates are seen to both listen to other candidates and to offer their own contributions to the discussion.

40. For 'Discussing Educational Matters with Peers', candidates are expected to provide ideas and/or suggestions that are relevant to the topic under discussion and are internally coherent so that both the assessors and the other candidates can understand them. In general, candidates were able to do this quite well, as the topics chosen were familiar to most teachers. Candidates should prepare for this part of the assessment by practising speaking in English with colleagues.

41. Candidates should understand that the nature of the speaking test is that the candidate's performance at the time of the assessment is the one that is taken into account. Whilst there should be some degree of correlation between the ability shown by each candidate on the different components of the LPATE, such as Speaking and Classroom Language Assessment, it does not follow that a candidate will automatically score the same on each test or on similar scales across the different tests.

Paper 5 (Classroom Language Assessment) [1]

42. A total of 464 candidates were assessed between December 2007 and April 2008. The pass rate was high with 94.6 % attaining at least Level 3 or above in all the four scales of *Grammatical and Lexical Accuracy and Range; Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation*; *Language of Interaction*; and *Language of Instruction.*

43. Significant improvement was noted in the overall quality of performance. There were also some outstanding candidates.

44. Grammatical and Lexical Accuracy and Range

   44.1 Accuracy in basic grammar was evident among most of the candidates though mistakes with articles, plurals, tenses, subject-verb agreement were still occasionally made by the average candidates. Indirect questions remained a problem and questions like 'Do you know what is it?', 'Can anyone tell me what is this means?' were common.

   44.2 While complex structures/sentences were handled with ease and confidence by the stronger candidates, they proved tricky for candidates whose use of structure was less precise. Of particular concern was the failure to use participles and clauses, as illustrated by the following examples: 'You are a visitor come [coming] to Hong Kong.'; 'We are talking about something happen [which happened] in the past'; 'You have learned one more thing is [which is] you should state the cause.'

   44.3 First language interference apparently also accounted for a number of grammatically inaccurate utterances, particularly on a lexical level: 'So how [what] can I do?'; 'Are you listening [listening to] me?'; 'What will you talk [say] to her?'; 'Except [Apart from] because, what else can I use?' It was generally felt that while the stronger candidates displayed a sophisticated control of vocabulary, the lexical range of many candidates was rather small.

45. Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation

   45.1 Pronunciation of sounds, sentence stress and intonation patterns were generally accurate. The stronger candidates also demonstrated a high degree of fluency and ease of speech.

   45.2 Some typical errors continued to cause some concern, one of which was the confusion over long/short vowels as in 'feel', 'dream', 'seat', 'dinner', 'missing. Weak candidates had difficulty distinguishing between /e/ and /ae/, leading some to confuse minimal pairs such as 'pen' and 'pan'. Some particular sounds like /l/, /r/, /and /ɵ/ and some consonant clusters proved difficult for the weaker candidates.

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[1] Administered by the EDB, which contributed this section of the Assessment Report.

45.3 Among the average candidates, there seemed to be a general lack of attention to the linking of sounds as in 'think about it', and the articulation of the final consonants as in 'coat', 'coal' and 'cold'.

46. Language of Interaction

46.1 Most candidates were able to involve students effectively in oral exchanges. Their responses were largely appropriate and often natural. Interaction was usually generated by questioning, prompting and eliciting. The stronger candidates also demonstrated highly flexible interactive language, sometimes with a touch of humour. One candidate in a primary one class responded to the noise in the class with, 'Who's talking? Who's Mr. Noisy?', and Mr. Noisy quickly stopped talking.

46.2 Some weaknesses noted were: the limited range of language used to initiate and request responses from students; the failure to respond appropriately to student errors; and the inability to handle interaction unrelated to classroom routine or the candidate's prepared topic, thus leading to some valid questions from students being totally ignored and dismissed.

47. Language of Instruction

47.1 Most candidates gave clear instructions and explanations. Their language was comprehensible and coherent. The appropriate use of signaling also enhanced the quality of their presentation.

47.2 The range of language used was sometimes felt to be rather limited. Some candidates kept to a few prepared questions/vocabulary items whereas some followed the textbooks so closely that their presentation was nothing but recitation. Activities which were 'over-familiar' to the students also tended to detract from the language of instruction.

47.3 It was also noted with some concern that while most candidates refrained from using Cantonese themselves, a few candidates injudiciously elicited Chinese translations from their students when they were explaining problematic vocabulary.

48. Concluding Remarks

An important general point, applicable to all papers, is that, as a proficiency test for teachers, the LPATE is demanding and requires a high level of linguistic sophistication and naturalness. Candidates need to be able to demonstrate that they are comfortable using English for a range of professional tasks, when listening, reading, writing and speaking. Such a high level of proficiency in a language is only acquired after regular and extensive use in different contexts and not in a short time by merely studying its mechanics. Candidates are therefore encouraged to take every opportunity to make English a part of daily life, for leisure, learning and

working, so that they understand the richness and depth of the language and can draw upon its resources effortlessly at any time.