

# Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (English Language) 2003 (September)

## Assessment Report

### Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is to consolidate the Chief Examiners' observations of the performance of candidates who sat the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (English Language) 2003 (September).

### General Observation

2. Candidates achieved different *proficiency attainment*\* rates in different papers. The proficiency attainment rates for individual papers were: Reading, 68%; Writing, 32%; Listening, 63%; Speaking, 46%; and Classroom Language Assessment, 85%.

### Paper 1: Reading

3. This paper consists of two parts, namely Part 1: Multiple-choice Cloze and Part 2: Reading Comprehension. The attainment rate of the 1858 candidates who attempted this paper was 68%.
  - 3.1 Candidates performed reasonably strongly in this paper, with 68% of the cohort achieving Level 3 or above. Candidates appeared to grasp the meaning of the comprehension questions and generally responded with appropriate information from the passages.
  - 3.2 The majority of candidates did not copy inappropriately from the passages. However, in attempts to use their own words, candidates sometimes produced incorrect answers because of errors in structure or word choice. It should be noted that the rubric is 'use your own words where appropriate', which should not be taken as an instruction to paraphrase in every case.
  - 3.3 There is still evidence that candidates need to manage their time better during the paper. A number of candidates did not finish the paper, even when the responses to some of the later questions would have been relatively easy to determine. There is also some evidence that some candidates are devoting too much time to either the multiple-choice cloze or the reading comprehension section of the paper, so that scores on one section of the paper are inordinately high, and on the other section, very low.

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\* Scoring '3' or above in the Reading and Listening papers, and '2.5' or above on any one scale and '3' or above on all other scales in the Writing, Speaking and Classroom Language Assessment (CLA) papers.

### ***Part 1: Multiple Choice Cloze***

4. Candidates were able to respond well to both parts of the cloze section, with strongest performance in items which required recognition of collocation, such as Item 17 ('people were using libraries more in response to reading initiatives') and those requiring an understanding of grammatical form, such as Item 25 ('I would like every Primary One parent next year to be involved in a school-based activity').
5. Items on which candidates performed less well included Items 6, 7 and 16 (lexical cohesion), and Items 20 and 23 (lexical choice/syntax).

### ***Part 2: Reading Comprehension***

6. Candidates appeared to find questions requiring global understanding most difficult – for example, those asking for a summary of reasons, or about a writer's point of view. There was some indication that candidates attempted to answer those questions based on their own assumptions, rather than on an understanding of the meaning in the passage. Some points to note concerning candidates' performance in this section are as follows:
  - 6.1 Many candidates were able to respond with appropriate and specific information, particularly to questions which asked for an understanding of a single piece of information. As noted earlier, some candidates had difficulty identifying the writer's attitude, or checking for global meaning, for example in identifying the main idea of a passage.
  - 6.2 Candidates sometimes resorted to copying out segments of the passage when asked to identify words or phrases which supported their answers. If the particular words or phrases were not specifically identified by the candidate, no mark was given.
  - 6.3 Most candidates did well at identifying pieces of information to fill in a chart or diagram, although in some cases there was evidence that candidates had not read through the information in the chart/diagram carefully to identify what was being asked for and how new information would logically fit.
7. Candidates should note the following advice:
  - 7.1 Aim to manage your time so that you can attempt all question items in the paper. Do not penalise yourself by devoting too much time to any one part of the paper.
  - 7.2 Allow time to read through each passage before attempting the questions. Attempting to answer questions based on your overall knowledge or assumptions will not yield correct responses. Questions are based on the passage and the writer's point of view, and you need to read the passage thoroughly to understand what that point of view is.

- 7.3 Do not assume that you understand a question by just glancing quickly at it. Read each question carefully to ensure that you understand what is being asked.
- 7.4 Read the rubric carefully. If the best response to a question is contained in words from the passage, use those words. If you do choose to use your own words, check that you have expressed your meaning clearly. While the mark scheme does not include the deduction of marks for grammatical or spelling mistakes, marks cannot be awarded if the marker cannot understand the answer.
- 7.5 Aim to read for pleasure to help the development of your language skills overall, and read for general knowledge and within your professional field to develop familiarity with vocabulary and modes of expression common to such literature.

## **Paper 2: Writing**

8. This paper consists of two parts, namely, Part 1: Task 1, Expository Writing, and Part 2: Tasks 2A & 2B, Correcting and Explaining Errors/Problems in a Student's Composition. Candidates are tested on five scales of performance, namely, (a) Organisation and Coherence, (b) Grammatical Accuracy, (c) Task Completion, (d) Correcting Errors/Problems, and (e) Explaining Errors/Problems. Descriptors of each scale are set out in the Syllabus Specifications published in November 2000. The proficiency attainment rate of the 1986 candidates who attempted this paper was 32%.

### ***Part I: Expository Writing***

9. Markers commented that the topic on *life learning skills* was appropriately chosen and allowed candidates of various proficiency levels to perform.
  - 9.1 When compared to the results of the previous administration of the LPATE, candidates in this administration performed better in Organisation and Coherence and Task Completion; but a large number of answer papers were still found to contain predictable and repetitive content as well as simplistic justifications. This shows that there is continued need for training in the generation and development of ideas.
  - 9.2 Markers noted that Grammatical Accuracy remained the weakest area. Obvious problems included wrong pronoun references, over-reliance on connectives, poor sentence structure, subject-verb disagreement, overuse of clichés and dangling modifiers. It was remarked by more than one marker that many candidates produced answers in which every sentence had one or more mistakes, and this was true of both candidates using simple sentences and candidates using longer phrases.

- 9.3 Another area which candidates need to pay more attention to is the context of writing, such as the purpose and the readers, which have implications for the choice of register and format.
10. Candidates are advised to spend more time reading English so as to increase their vocabulary, and practising their writing. In future assessments, candidates should make sure they read the task instructions carefully.

### ***Part II: Correcting and explaining errors/problems***

11. Although candidates generally performed well in Task 2A, where they were asked to correct errors or problems, most candidates were not able to reach the minimum requirement of 60% of correct explanations of errors or problems in Task 2B. Below are a number of reasons for the unsatisfactory performance in Task 2B.

- 11.1 Many candidates failed to demonstrate a good understanding of grammar and the metalanguage needed to explain syntactic and lexical errors. For example:

(9) You can enjoy an excited cable-car ride

An explanation such as ‘The problem is the incorrect use of the word excited’ scored no marks because it is necessary to (i) point out that ‘excited’ is not just a word but an adjective, and (ii) state why it is wrong and what should be used instead. So a possible answer would be:

‘The problem is the incorrect use of the adjective form ‘excited’. In order to describe the effect of the cable-car ride, the ING form ‘exciting’ should be used instead.’

- 11.2 Instead of explaining the error or problem, many candidates simply described it:

(8) Where you can to watch the Chinese cultural shows

It is not enough just to write ‘The problem is the infinitive “to watch”, which is not appropriate.’ Candidates will only score partial marks for such answers. To score full marks an explanation is also required, i.e.

‘The problem is the inappropriate use of the infinitive “to watch”. After the modal verb “can”, the bare infinitive “watch” should be used instead.’

- 11.3 It was very difficult to award marks to confusing explanations which contained semantic and syntactic errors:

(11) because they are reasonable priced.

To explain why the clause ‘they are reasonable priced’ is wrong, some candidates wrote ‘The problem is the wrong use of adverb. Should be reasonably.’ This answer was not acceptable because in the original sentence it

is the adjective 'reasonable' that is inappropriate and should be replaced by the adverb form 'reasonably'.

11.4 Answers with fatal spelling mistakes cannot be awarded full marks. For example, many candidates wrote 'model verbs' instead of 'modal verbs', such as 'It is not permitted to use an infinite with "to" after model verb'.

11.5 Some candidates wrote a myriad of conflicting grammatical terms as if they were hoping to increase their chances of hitting the right answer:

(10) which have much different kinds of fish

In order to explain the wrong use of 'have', a candidate first stated that it was a spelling mistake, then explained that it was a problem with tense, then finally that it was a plural problem. This kind of answer was not acceptable and would not score any marks, since it showed that the candidate did not know what the grammatical problem really was.

11.6 Some candidates still used Chinese-English translation as a reason for explaining errors. For example, it was quite common to see an explanation such as 'The first problem is a writing of Chinese-English'. Such an explanation will score no marks.

11.7 Some candidates also tended to over-correct and explain errors that are not errors at all:

(7) many tourists go to there to enjoy the restaurants

A few candidates stated that the above should be changed to 'many tourists go to there to enjoy the food', as it is not appropriate to say 'enjoy the restaurant'. Obviously nothing was given for such explanations.

12. Candidates are reminded to follow the instructions carefully. Some candidates either put their answers to the two tasks together or explained all the errors instead of those designated. This caused difficulties in marking.

13. The problems exhibited in the answers given in Task 2B indicate that there is a great need for many pre- and in-service teachers to strengthen their foundation in English language, including lexis, syntax and semantics. Otherwise, students will likely be taught wrong structures and usage, and be given inappropriate or inaccurate explanations that cannot help them differentiate between correct and wrong use of English.

### **Paper 3: Listening**

14. The paper was based on the contents of a tour of an independent language learning centre at a university in Hong Kong. In the tour, the tour guide spoke to three staff members from the university who were responsible for different aspects of the running of the centre. In addition, two teachers of English from Hong Kong schools

took part in the tour and asked questions of the staff members. The contents of the tour focused on the organisation of the centre, the ways that students could use the centre to improve their English language skills and the ways in which students at the university actually used the centre. The paper contained a range of suitable task types including blank-filling, table-completion, listen-and-check, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. This range allowed for a variety of appropriate listening skills to be tested. The recording was natural sounding and delivered at a normal speaking speed in standard accents (native English speakers and Hong Kong Chinese second language English speakers).

15. A total of 1801 candidates took this paper with 63% of candidates obtaining a Level 3 or above (Language Proficiency Requirement).
16. In a number of items candidates were able to make an attempt at the answer that was relevant but failed to answer the question.
  - 16.1 For example, Items 5 and 6 required the candidates to state the ‘functions of the counter and its staff’. The required answers were ‘Give students information on programmes’ and ‘Provide technical assistance’. The underlined verbs were essential parts of the answer as they indicated *functions* of the counter and its staff.
  - 16.2 Similarly, for Item 24, candidates were required to complete the sentence: ‘The mirrors on top of the monitors are for students to use with \_\_\_\_\_’. The answer was ‘pronunciation programs’ and not simply ‘to help with pronunciation’. Candidates needed to read the stem of the sentence clearly and then complete the sentence using the information on the recording, such that the sentence is both logical and conveys the meaning required.
  - 16.3 Items 62, 66 and 68 required candidates to complete a table with a ‘type of activity’ run by the centre. The key word here was *type* and the example of ‘seminar’ was given. The answers to these items were ‘carnival’, ‘round table discussion’ and ‘conversation group’ respectively. However, many candidates wrote down the *title* of the activity (such as ‘Fun with Professional English’ for Item 62) rather than the *type* and so lost marks. Candidates must read the question and note the given examples carefully to ascertain the required form of answer.
17. As in previous administrations, candidates found it difficult to identify numbers correctly. This is an important aspect of listening ability and so candidates should practise this.
18. Candidates should note the following advice:
  - 18.1 When preparing for this test, candidates are recommended to listen to much more spoken English and to a wide variety of genres, accents and speeds.
  - 18.2 During the test, candidates must ensure that they read the questions carefully and understand the requirement of each question.

## **Paper 4: Speaking**

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

Candidates are tested on six scales of performance, namely, (a) Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation; (b) Reading Aloud with Meaning; (c) Grammatical Accuracy; (d) Organisation and Cohesion; (e) Interacting with Peers; and (f) Explaining Language Matters to Peers. Descriptors of each scale are set out in the Syllabus Specifications published in November 2000.

The proficiency attainment rate of the 1856 candidates who attempted this paper was 46%.

### ***Part 1: Tasks 1A, 1B and 1C***

20. The following are specific comments on Part 1 of the speaking assessment:
- 20.1 In this part of the paper, assessors observed that candidates performed best in Task 1C (Telling a Story/Recounting an Experience/Presenting Arguments), followed by Task 1A (Reading Aloud a Prose Passage) and Task 1B (Reading Aloud a Poem).
- 20.2 The major weakness of candidates in Part 1 was found in Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation when reading aloud the prose passage and the poem, with stress and intonation a particular problem for many. 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 poem or prose to that audience through appropriate stress and phrasing.
- 20.3 In general, Task 1C was carried out well by most candidates, who were able to talk on the given topic for the time required. A small minority of candidates did appear to read 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 'monologue' incoherent. Candidates are advised to make brief notes during the preparation time and to work from these, such 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.

- 20.4 Assessors also found that many candidates demonstrated a poor control of grammatical structures and so were unable to score highly on Grammatical Accuracy when performing their presentation in Task 1C. Assessors are looking for the ability of candidates to use a range of grammatical structures accurately. Again, more exposure to English in the form of reading would help instil in candidates a firm grasp of grammar.

### ***Part 2: Group Interaction***

21. For Part 2, Group Interaction, candidates should note the following:
- 21.1 In Part 2 of the paper, candidates were able to make use of conversational strategies; hence, on the whole they did quite well in this part of the paper, especially on the scale of Interacting with Peers. A weakness observed was the use of incorrect grammatical terms and/or erroneous grammatical explanations. Candidates should try to become more familiar with basic grammatical terminology so that they are able to identify errors.
- 21.2 In a number of cases, candidates talked about certain categories of errors that did not feature in the text. This indicated that they had rehearsed a ‘speech’ prior to the assessment. In such cases candidates were marked down on Explaining Language Matters to Peers, as they had not shown an ability to discuss the errors in the text provided.
- 21.3 Another weakness of some candidates in the group interaction was the tendency to talk about irrelevant matters such as the characteristics of their own students or problems with the education system. This showed an inability to interact with peers, which should involve not only speaking to others but also listening to them and responding appropriately. Again, candidates should prepare for this part of the assessment by practising speaking in English with colleagues rather than memorising sections of speech in advance.
22. 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.
23. As the speaking test is not recorded, there is no opportunity for candidates to appeal against their result after the announcement of results, other than to have their scoresheets checked for technical errors. If candidates consider that they may have been unfairly assessed for any reason, they should report to the Chief Examiner on duty at the Assessment Centre immediately.



## Paper 5: Classroom Language Assessment

24. Classroom Language Assessment for this administration followed a tight schedule as the number of candidates showed a significant increase over the previous administration. Results indicated that 85 % of the 709 candidates attained Level 3 or above in all the four scales of Grammar, Pronunciation, Language of Interaction and Language of Instruction.
- 24.1 In terms of pronunciation, common problems as have been pointed out in previous reports remained apparent. They included the usual problems with vowel distinction, consonant clusters and final consonants. In many cases these did affect communication.
- 24.2 In some rare cases, poor intonation also gave rise to concern. A few candidates actually used the same tone for all kinds of sentences, as in the use of the same rising tone irrespective of the question type. Inappropriate stress was another problem experienced by many candidates, especially with weak vowel sounds, such as the second syllable in words like 'picture' or 'enter'.
- 24.3 While perfect enunciation for every single word uttered is not expected, language teachers should aim to be accurate in their speech and articulation. Language teachers serve as models for their students as far as language acquisition is concerned. Efforts should therefore be made by teachers to present themselves as such. Taking the final consonant as an example, while it is natural to drop the final consonant in authentic speech, especially when it is fast-paced and informal, there are occasions when a missing final consonant can bring about a change of meaning, thus resulting in communication being impeded. 'Please dine with me' can easily turn into a request of a very different kind when it is uttered as 'Please die with me'; and 'I love to paint' can suffer a similarly unpleasant twist when it becomes 'I love to pain', and all because the final consonants are not properly pronounced. Teachers are therefore strongly advised to pay good attention not only to accuracy and fluency but also their personal speech habits.
- 24.4 Problems with grammatical structure and usage included those in agreement, tenses, parts of speech and sentence structure. While some errors occurred as occasional slips, many were obviously the result of linguistic inadequacy. Even for teachers with a firm grasp of grammatical rules, problems with proper usage, as in the incorrect collocation of words, remained apparent. 'Can you make me an example?' should serve as an example.
- 24.5 Most teachers demonstrated both confidence and competence in their Language of Instruction, and apart from a few rare cases, the language employed was well-suited to the level. The use of signalling devices was also appropriate in most cases. Despite the satisfactory performance in general however, it was felt that for some teachers at least, the language of instruction tended to be largely mechanical. Future candidates might wish to give this comment a bit more thought.

- 24.6 Similarly for the Language of Interaction, while the performance of most teachers was satisfactory, the language displayed on the whole lacked scope and range. In some cases where teachers simply read out from books and power points, there was practically no real interaction taking place. It was also a pity to see that because of language inadequacy, quite a number of teachers actually failed to address class discipline problems, which is one key element of interaction.
25. One important point to note is that candidates should always ensure there is an adequate amount of both the Language of Instruction and the Language of Interaction for a fair and accurate assessment.
26. Finally, to do themselves justice, candidates must first and foremost make themselves audible, even in the midst of noise. When interacting with individual students or small groups, teachers should also make every possible attempt to make themselves heard by the assessor, who is normally positioned at the back of the classroom. Where the situation permits, teachers should display variety and complexity in their language. To quote from our previous report, ‘teachers should always allow as full a display of their language competence as possible during the assessment’. A ‘Good’ said too many times loses its appeal, even for students most hungry for praise.