

Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (English Language) 2003 (March)

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 (March).

General Observation

2. Candidates achieved different *proficiency attainment** rates in different papers. The proficiency attainment rates for individual papers were: Reading, 63%; Writing, 41%; Listening, 72%; Speaking, 45%; and Classroom Language Assessment, 89%.

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 1968 candidates who attempted this paper was 63%.
 - 3.1 Candidates' performance was reasonably strong in this paper. This would appear to reflect the candidates' ability to understand and respond to the passages, the topics of which were within the areas of teaching and learning which should be familiar to the cohort.
 - 3.2 Candidates made a number of grammatical mistakes in their answers, sometimes in what appeared to be attempts to find their own words and expressions with which to respond to the questions. In some cases, these attempts led to the production of wrong answers.
 - 3.3 It should also be noted, however, that where the answer is correct, candidates are not penalised for incorrect structure or grammar which does not impede the understanding of their responses. The marking scheme ignores the presence of such errors.
 - 3.4 There is still evidence that candidates are having problems managing their time in the examination. In some papers, Passage B had not been attempted at all; in others there were several questions for one or both passages that had not been attempted. There were papers in which the scores in Part 1 were exceptionally high, but scores for Part 2 relatively low because of incomplete work.

* 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. Most items were correctly answered by more than 50% of the candidates, indicating relatively strong recognition of the meaning of the text overall, structural cues, and lexical meaning. Items on which candidates performed less well included Item 1 (lexical choice), Item 9 (lexical cohesion) and Item 24 (lexical choice/syntax).

Part 2: Reading Comprehension

5. Questions concerning writer attitudes and interpretation of the writer's point of view appeared to be challenging for many candidates. The question asking for explanation of a metaphor in Passage A attracted a number of wrong interpretations. With one exception, questions about referencing were reasonably well-handled (e.g. 'this' in line xx refers to...). Candidates' performance in the Reading Comprehension section is outlined below.
 - 5.1 Evidence of 'indiscriminate copying' was limited, with the clearest example being in responses to a question for Passage A asking candidates to find the phrase in the passage meaning 'to find a way of cheating without getting caught'. The correct answer was 'circumvent the system', but many candidates included the earlier part of the sentence 'a challenge to circumvent the system', which is wrong.
 - 5.2 In items asking for lexical meaning, candidates showed a limited ability to guess words from context and to understand the meaning of the question itself.
 - 5.3 Responses to questions calling for an understanding of component parts of an idea or process were relatively well-handled, with candidates performing quite strongly in, for example, questions asking for completion of charts with specific information from the passage.
 - 5.4 Stronger candidates were able to provide specific and apt responses to reflect their understanding of the passage and the questions.
6. Candidates should note the following advice:
 - 6.1 Aim to manage your time so that you can attempt all question items in the paper.
 - 6.2 Allow time to read through each passage before attempting the questions. Attempting to answer questions based on your overall knowledge or beliefs 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.
 - 6.3 Read the rubric carefully. If the best response to a question is contained in words from the passage, use those words.

- 6.4 Aim to read for pleasure to help the development of your language skills overall, and read within your professional field to develop familiarity with vocabulary and modes of expression common to such literature.

Paper 2: Writing

7. 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 1998 candidates who attempted this paper was 41%.

Part I: Expository Writing

8. In general, the markers commented that the task was well set, the topic suitably chosen and the question pitched at the right level. The following points should be noted:
- 8.1 Many candidates were unable to perform satisfactorily on Task Completion. The first part of the task stated clearly that candidates had to give examples of how teachers and parents could work together. Many candidates, however, wrote what teachers and parents should do separately. This revealed a lack of attention to task; and future candidates are strongly recommended to read the task instructions carefully and repeatedly, if necessary, to ensure that they address the task properly and thoroughly with appropriate content.
- 8.2 The second part of the task built on the background that examinations cause students a great deal of stress and asked candidates to suggest an alternative assessment method with justification. Some candidates simply gave 'less stressful' as the reason; some confused better assessment method with better learning method; and numerous scripts contained no explanation of how the new method could reduce stress rather than increase stress. Perhaps the weaker candidates did not have the language support to allow them to expand their ideas; but overall performance in this aspect strongly suggests the need for more training in thinking skills and content generation among teachers and teachers-to-be.
- 8.3 Another aspect that candidates need to put more focus on is the use of register. When writing, they need to consider the distance and relationship between the writer and the reader, which in turn determine the tone and style of the text. In this year's Writing Paper, adopting a tone of politeness and cooperation would have been most appropriate. Many scripts, however, sounded condescending, and instead of suggesting channels for parent-teacher cooperation, a considerable number of candidates wrote as though admonishing parents (and sometimes teachers as well). The overuse and misuse of 'should' such as 'Parents should seek help from teachers', 'Parents should be frank enough to

listen to their children's voice' and 'Parents should also have an open mind to education' displayed a lack of sensitivity to the text and to the reader. Scripts such as these were marked down on Organisation and Coherence.

- 8.4 The markers commented on the poor language standard of some weaker candidates as well as overall limitations in terms of lexical and structural variations. Lower-order grammatical errors were also common, such as subject-verb agreement, countable and uncountable nouns, and singular-plural forms.
9. 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

10. Most of the candidates seemed to have adequate time to complete Task 2A (i.e. Correcting Errors/Problems in a Student's Composition), and Task 2B (i.e. Explaining Errors/Problems in a Student's Composition).
- 10.1 The markers generally felt that the student composition provided in this part of the Writing Paper was fitting as it contained common errors that local students often make; and as such, provided testing points that mirror language issues English teachers have to deal with in their day-to-day teaching. The two tasks were seen as a suitable way of testing language proficiency, knowledge of grammar as well as the ability to mark students' work.
- 10.2 As in previous administrations, a few candidates did not realize that Tasks 2A and 2B were to be done separately and instead put their answers to the two tasks together. This caused difficulties in marking. Once again, candidates are reminded to read the instructions carefully.
- 10.3 There appeared to be an overall improvement in the ability to correct errors compared with previous administrations. The tendency to over-correct, although present, was somewhat less evident than previously.
- 10.4 Each error/problem in Task 2B, Explaining Errors/Problems, needs to be addressed on two levels. The rubric states clearly that candidates are 'required to explain the error(s)/problem(s)' and demonstrate their 'understanding of the underlying rules or generalisations, using grammatical terms where appropriate'. The relatively poor performance in this task could be attributed to a number of reasons, as outlined below.
- 10.5 Description of the correction made without explanation:

(2) He is ten year old and ...

In this item, 'ten year old' should be written as 'ten years old' as the noun 'year' should have a plural 's' added to it to agree with the

adjective/determiner ‘ten’, which is a plural number. Some candidates wrote: ‘Should be ten years old, not ten year old.’ No reason was given at all, therefore no credit given for this answer.

10.6 Wrong identification of error:

(4) He look like ...

The error in this item is that the verb ‘look’ should be changed to ‘looks’ in order to agree with the third-person singular subject form ‘he’. A number of candidates incorrectly described this as ‘a tense problem’.

(7) He likes play TV game ...

In this item, the bare infinitive form ‘play’ is incorrectly used and should be replaced by either the gerund ‘playing’ or the infinitive with ‘to’ as in ‘to play’. Some candidates wrongly pointed out that ‘the preposition “to” should be added before an action’.

10.7 Failure to detect the problem:

(11) he is a good brother. It is because he...

Here, the error is the use of the wrong reference word ‘It’, which should be replaced by ‘This’. Many candidates said that the full stop and ‘It is’ could be replaced by ‘as’ to join the two sentences. Whilst this is one way of correcting the error, it does not explain the problem.

10.8 Ambiguous answers:

(9) ... it was excellence ...

Typical ambiguous answers included ‘Wrong use of adjective and noun’, ‘Wrong use of adjective. The noun excellence should become excellent’ and ‘Excellence is a noun, not an adjective.’ (All incorrect)

(2) He is ... the tallest than me

In this item, the student has used the incorrect form of the adjective ‘tall’, i.e. the superlative ‘the tallest’ and should use the comparative form ‘taller’ as only two people are being compared. Some candidates wrote that the problem was the incorrect use of the comparative form, which is clearly incorrect.

10.9 Incomplete explanations

(9) ...he had got his report card

The use of ‘had got’ here is incorrect as the past perfect is normally used to describe a past action that occurs before another past action. An explanation that there is a tense error here is insufficient. It is necessary to state why the

past perfect is not suitable (i.e. because only one past action is stated) and that it should be replaced by the simple past form 'he got'.

10.10 Explanations that are full of language errors and spelling mistakes:

(2) He is...and tallest than me

One candidate wrote: ““Taller” shall be used instead “tallest” because it is just comparation between 2 persons. So the superactive form, “tallest” should not be used.’ In this case the marker gave the candidate the benefit of the doubt and awarded partial credit for a correct explanation of error.

10.11 Explanation of the correction without explanation of the error:

(7) He likes play TV game and watching TV

Many candidates stated that a gerund usually follows the verb 'like' but few managed to point out that the error here was the wrong use of the bare infinitive 'play'.

10.12 In addition to the inappropriate types of answers elucidated above, it should be noted that 'first language interference' or 'Chinese-English' is not acceptable as an explanation of errors/problems.

11. The incorrect use of grammatical terminology, the confusion about basic English structures and the lack of awareness of more complex structures, together with the abundance of grammatical errors in the explanations, were a prominent feature of the candidates' answers for Task 2B. It is strongly recommended that both pre- and in-service teachers build a strong foundation in lexis and syntax through further training and continuous self-learning so that their students can differentiate between the right and the wrong structures in English.

Paper 3: Listening

12. This year's paper was based on the contents of a talk given by Professor Bill Littlewood, a language educator at a Hong Kong tertiary institution. The talk was addressed to a group of teachers of English, the contents of which focused primarily on a piece of research Professor Littlewood had completed. The paper contained a range of suitable task types including blank-filling, true/false (agree/disagree), 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). Of the 1985 candidates who took this paper, 72% achieved the proficiency requirement (level 3) or above.

12.1 Quite a few of the items in this year's paper involved local retrieval (e.g. dates, numbers, names) and these were generally answered correctly by most

candidates, although some candidates were unable to distinguish certain place names.

- 12.2 Some of the more difficult items required candidates to infer individual speakers' attitudes and emotions from the words each of them used in a conversation segment. Analysis of the results shows that candidates who scored highly on these items also scored highly on the whole test.
 - 12.3 The 'agree/disagree' items proved to be easy for most candidates.
 - 12.4 Many answers given by the weaker candidates were irrelevant to the questions or failed to pick up on the detail of information given.
 - 12.5 Local retrieval items were in general believed to be easier items. There is evidence from this year's test to say that many candidates are still not used to listening to names and numbers, especially when they are under a certain amount of time pressure.
13. 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.

Paper 4: Speaking

14. 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/Retelling 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 1878 candidates who attempted this paper was 45%.

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

15. The following are specific comments on Part 1 of the speaking assessment:
- 15.1 In this part of the paper, assessors observed that candidates performed best in Task 1C (i.e. Telling a Story/Retelling an Experience/Presenting Arguments), followed by Task 1A (i.e. Reading Aloud a Prose Passage) and Task 1B (i.e. Reading Aloud a Poem).
 - 15.2 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.

- 15.3 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.
- 15.4 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

16. For Part 2, Group Interaction, candidates should note the following:
- 16.5 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.
- 16.6 In a number of cases, candidates talked about certain categories of errors that did not feature in the text. This would indicate that they had rehearsed a 'speech' prior to the assessment. In such cases candidates are marked down on Explaining Language Matters to Peers as they had not shown an ability to discuss the errors in the text provided.
- 16.7 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 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.

Paper 5: Classroom Language Assessment

17. The attainment rate for this paper has been consistently high, and for this year, 89% of the 1123 candidates attained Level 3 or above in all the four scales of ‘Grammatical Accuracy’; ‘Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation’; ‘Language of Interaction’ and ‘Language of Instruction’.
 - 17.1 L1 interference remained the overriding problem for both grammar and pronunciation. Problems with /l/, /n/, /r/, /v/ and long/short vowel distinction seemed particularly serious. Communication was actually impeded when teachers failed to make a clear distinction between words like ‘night/light’, ‘lumber/number’, ‘wise/vice’, ‘slip/sleep’, and ‘leave/live’.
 - 17.2 Another common problem concerned consonant clusters. Confusion arose when teachers said ‘cock’ for ‘clock’, ‘fog’ for ‘frog’ and ‘face’ for ‘phrase’, just to cite a few examples. Inattentiveness to final consonants in some situations also resulted in communication being badly impeded, as in ‘mate/maid’, ‘sigh/sign’.
 - 17.3 Syllable stress and accent, on the other hand, seldom constituted significant problems though many teachers did speak with an obvious Chinese accent and there was a general lack of fluency in many cases.
 - 17.4 L1 interference was most evident in grammar and affected performances in the language of instruction. Expressions similar to these were common: “I am very like it. Do you like?”; “Don’t be too fast. Otherwise, you’ll be dangerous.”; “Do not afraid of it.”; “Any words you don’t know the meaning?”; “Do not sleep more. Sleeping can make you fatter.” These problems with structure and usage were real issues of concern as they rendered the teachers rather poor models for their students.
 - 17.5 In giving explanations, linguistic inadequacy might render the explanation totally ineffective, if not confusing. The following definitions proved rather interesting, and in fact, intriguing: “Tail is the lowest part of the animal.”; “Skirt is a small dress.”; “Turkey is a big chicken.”
 - 17.6 Most teachers had no problem using language appropriate to the level and interaction with the students in general was satisfactory. A few candidates, however, failed to give proper responses conducive to interaction and learning. In one situation, for example, a form two student said, “Sorry, sir. I don’t know.” In response, the teacher said, “Very good.” This could hardly be taken as a prompt and it served rather poorly even as recognition of the student’s effort to apologize for failing to produce an answer.

18. As outlined in previous reports, teachers should always allow as full a display of their language competence as possible during the assessment. A good choice of activities to provide opportunities for a proper range of vocabulary and sentence patterns to be used for both instruction and interaction is therefore of great importance. Similarly, teachers are encouraged to always respond verbally/linguistically. To over-rely solely on body language and pictorial representation might give the impression of 'avoidance' and therefore a possible indication of linguistic inadequacy.
19. This year as a result of the outbreak of SARS, the schedule for CLA was greatly affected. We would like to thank the principals and teachers for the successful completion of all the visits, despite them being delayed.