

Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (English Language) 2007

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 2007.

General Observations

2. Candidates achieved different proficiency attainment* rates in different papers. The proficiency attainment rates for individual papers were: Reading 78.8%; Writing 39.6%; Listening 80.4%; Speaking 47.7%; Classroom Language Assessment 92.7%.

Paper 1 (Reading)

3. Candidates' performance was relatively strong in this paper, with approximately 79% reaching the benchmark (Level 3) level.
4. Performance in the multiple choice cloze and the reading comprehension sections was generally even. However, there was again evidence of some candidates' not managing their time well, illustrated by questions in passage two of the reading comprehension left unanswered or with what appeared to be hastily scrawled attempts to respond.

Part 1: Multiple choice cloze

5. Candidates performed quite strongly in this section, with no significant difference in performance between Passages A and B. Candidates appeared to find the correct choice to the first several items in each passage relatively easy to identify. Candidates dealt ably with the selection of appropriate verb forms and tenses, prepositions, the expression of idea relationships and the majority of lexical items. They appeared to have difficulty with some lexical choices, particularly of appropriate verbs, and with reference items.

Part 2: Reading comprehension

6. Most questions in both passages were attempted; however there was still evidence that some candidates did not leave enough time to finish both passages. Performance in Passage B was less strong than in Passage A, which may have been in part the result of candidates allocating insufficient time to read, think about and respond to questions about the second passage.

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

7. Candidates generally performed well on questions requiring the retrieval of specific information (e.g. Question 4 ‘According to the writer, how do students usually come into contact with English other than in the classroom?’; Question 14 ‘According to the writer, what is unique about “this generation” (line 3)?’ Candidates were generally able to respond to questions requiring a reference to earlier information in the passage (e.g. Question 5 ‘In line 22, who are “These mythical people?”’; Question 11 ‘In line 60, what does “these” refer to?’) where the reference was to a thing or a person. They had greater difficulty responding to questions where the reference was to a condition or state of affairs (e.g. Question 23 ‘In line 37, what does “This” refer to?’).
8. Candidates performed less well where questions asked for an understanding or interpretation of the writer’s viewpoint or purpose (e.g. Question 7. ‘In the paragraph...why does the writer mention his working days...’. Relatively few candidates were able to identify the writer’s purpose as exemplification/illustration of his point. Those candidates who were able to do so were candidates who performed relatively strongly overall.
9. Most candidates completed the chart in Question 6 reasonably well, except for the last item (d) to which many of the responses were irrelevant, omitting the aspect ‘Development of course content’.
10. With reference to the understanding of aspects of literary style in the passages, most candidates were able to identify the metaphor asked for in Question 12 and the characterization asked for in Question 21. Candidates performed significantly less well in responding to Question 17 ‘...what expression is used by the writer to refer to the act of listening to music?’, perhaps not recognizing that ‘the act of listening’ would indicate the ‘doing’ of something, i.e. ‘communing’ with the Muse.
11. There was some evidence that candidates had not read from question to question to understand how these sought to uncover the meaning in the passages. Question 19, for example, asks for the underlying reason why ‘some people insist that classical music is still popular among young people today’. The answer to that question is unlikely to be the same as that for the next question, which asks for ‘the writer’s evidence that there is limited interest in classical music...’, yet many candidates responded to both with the same general answer.
12. Overall there was relatively little evidence of indiscriminate copying, although where this did take place the response was usually inappropriate and attracted no marks. It is important for candidates to recognize that each question is looking for specific information as a response.
13. Advice to candidates
 - 13.1 Plan and use your time carefully so that you can respond to all questions in the Paper. Be sure to reserve appropriate time to complete all questions in Part B.

- 13.2 Look through the entire set of questions for a passage before beginning to respond. You will benefit by getting a sense of the writer's intent and the flow of the questions before starting to write your answers.
- 13.3 When you begin to answer each question, read it carefully to understand what it is asking. For example, if a question asks 'why' (e.g. Question 10 '...why does the writer use the word "likewise"?'), look for the writer's reason/communicative purpose, not simply for the meaning of the word.
- 13.4 Read 'backward and forward' in the passage as you attempt to answer each question, to ensure that you have captured information which is relevant and appropriate to the question.
- 13.5 Check to see how many marks are awarded to the question. If two marks are awarded, you may need to provide two parts or points in your answer.
- 13.6 Be aware that your first answer to the question is the one which will be marked. Indiscriminate copying of chunks of information from the passage is unlikely to earn marks.
- 13.7 If the best response to a question is contained in words from the passage, use those words. If you choose to use your own words, check that you have expressed your meaning clearly so that the marker can understand your answer.
- 13.8 Read on a regular basis to enhance your overall English language skills. Aim to read different types of material and genres so as to become familiar with various writing styles and with the conventions of good writing, as well as with the use of literary devices such as metaphor.

Paper 2 (Writing)

14. This paper consists of two parts, 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, (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 was 39.6%.

Part 1: Expository Writing

15. Markers commented that the topic area of multiculturalism was well chosen. Candidates generally performed quite well on the first part of the task in

which they described at least two suggested activities to be held on a 'Multicultural Awareness Day' in school.

16. Candidates' performance in providing justifications for their suggested activities, however, was less satisfactory. Some simply stated that it was good to organise their suggested activities because these promote multiculturalism; in other words, they failed to explain the reason for their choice of activities and in what concrete ways the events would enhance students' multicultural awareness.
17. Another area for improvement is achieving a balance when writing various parts of the task. The task required candidates to (i) describe suggested activities and (ii) justify their choices. Many candidates wrote a lot, perhaps too much, about (i) and not enough about (ii).
18. Candidates are reminded once again to be mindful of the word limit. Many of the candidates who wrote too much either lost focus or went off topic. Candidates are also reminded to take some time to plan their essay. Markers remarked that although most scripts showed an acceptable overall structure, (1) the introduction paragraph often seemed muddled and repetitive; and (2) individual paragraphs lacked coherence.
19. Language use continued to be the weakest area in candidates' performance, the common errors being wrong verb form and tense, incorrect complex structures and wrong spelling. Vocabulary range was also rather disappointing. Inappropriate use of grammar and vocabulary often resulted in unsuitable tone, style and level of formality, which made the messages to the Principal sound like reports of decisions made or actions taken, rather than proposals of possible activities.
20. Candidates are urged to read a wide variety of texts and genres to improve their writing skills, and to have a stronger understanding of the register appropriate for different genres and situations.

Part 2: Correcting and explaining errors/problems

21. Markers were of the opinion that the paper and tasks were of a difficulty level appropriate for school teachers. The items managed to discriminate well between the stronger and weaker candidates.

Task 2A

22. The performance in Task 2A (correcting errors/problems) was generally satisfactory. However, an item for which many candidates failed to provide appropriate corrections was Item 5.

[The latest fashions] are too expensive for me and not pretty. (5) On the contrary, I like buy presents for my family, ...

Accepting the discourse marker 'On the contrary' as correct or changing it to 'Contrary to this' show a lack of understanding that the connective

introduces a proposition in conflict or in opposition to that which was previously stated.

Task 2B

23. The performance in Task 2B (explaining errors/problems) was less satisfactory. Although after many rounds of LPATE many candidates had learned the importance and necessity of using appropriate metalanguage in their answers, many of the explanations given were still vague and incomplete, if not incorrect. This phenomenon continues to reveal some candidates' inadequate knowledge of syntax and semantics. Below are some of the reasons for the unsatisfactory performance in Task 2B.

- A number of candidates showed inadequate knowledge of some rather basic grammar points. For example:

... they (10) only said me good things about mine school work

Answers such as “the auxiliary verb ‘said’ should be changed” (instead of the main verb ‘said’) are incorrect.

Similarly, “the reflexive pronoun ‘mine’ is wrong” is unacceptable since ‘mine’ is a possessive pronoun.

- Some answers revealed confusion over parts of speech. For example:

(4) I no like to buy the lately fashions, like baggy jeans

The correct answer is that the adverb ‘lately’ should be changed to the adjective ‘latest’, but some candidates wrote “the adjective ‘lately’”, “the adverb ‘latest’”, or “the wrong usage of adjective”, none of which are acceptable.

- Misspelling of key words was another problem. For example, answers like “should be changed to ‘lastest’” for Item 4, or “the procession pronoun ‘mine’” for Item 10 could not be awarded any marks.
- Despite repeated reminders in previous CE reports, there continued to be candidates who simply described the errors/problems rather than explaining them, for example:

(2) breakfast in restaurant on top of the bigger building

It was not enough to write “the use of ‘bigger’ should be replaced by ‘biggest’” since this answer did not show that the candidate understands why the comparative adjective ‘bigger’ is unsuitable in this item and why the superlative adjective ‘biggest’ is.

(4) I no like to buy the lately fashions, like baggy jeans

The answer “The first problem is using in ‘I no like’, it necessary to write in ‘I don’t like’ conveys the correct meaning” received no marks since it was a description of the replacement without a clear and adequate explanation of how the correct negative form of the verb ‘like’ is formed. Answers such as this that contain numerous grammatical errors also reveal the low language proficiency level of some candidates.

- Answers to Item 11 showed inadequate understanding of the construction of question tags as well as misunderstanding of some basic grammar structures.

(11) It very good, don’t it?

These answers were incorrect:

“The first problem is subject-verb agreement, it should be ‘it was’.”

“It should be ‘wasn’t it’ instead of ‘don’t it’ because ‘don’t’ is a modal verb.”

“The second problem is once of tense. He should use ‘wasn’t it’ instead of ‘don’t it’.”

The correct answer should state the problems clearly and explain how they can be rectified. For example, it should state that the first problem is a missing verb: ‘was’ should be inserted after the subject ‘It’. The second problem is one of wrong verb in the question tag. The correct verb should be ‘wasn’t’ since the verb of the tag should be the same as that in the main clause.

Potential candidates are encouraged to enhance their knowledge and understanding of lexis, syntax and semantics.

Paper 3 (Listening)

24. The blueprint for this listening paper was a live interview with some vocational educators from three different post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong.
25. The speakers in the paper assumed four different roles: (1) the radio programme presenter (Alan, a male native speaker of English), (2) a library science educator from a tertiary institution (Sally, a female non-native speaker of English), (3) a lecturer from a vocational institution specializing in business education (Barry, a male native speaker of English), and (4) an associate professor of nursing at a Hong Kong university (John, a male native speaker of English). The recording was as natural as possible and language was delivered at a normal speed for the type of discourse simulated. The four speakers had distinct voices and different specializations making it easy for candidates to identify them in the subsequent discussion.
26. The discussion begins with background information about the three

vocational educators. It then moves to the nature and purposes of vocational education and to vocational education provision in Hong Kong. The speakers argue for the importance of vocational education, point out the challenges Hong Kong will have to face in this area, and suggest directions for further work.

27. The moderation committee which set the paper did its best to ensure that candidates were asked to retrieve and interpret messages solely from the aural text, rather than from everyday knowledge about vocational training. The paper went through a rigorous pre-testing and moderation process during which the committee reviewed feedback from the pre-test and made adjustments to the recording and questions. The reliability index of this paper was a high 0.9, with a standard error of measurement of 3.35.
28. The topic allowed the use of a wide range of question types testing all aspects of listening. A wide variety of task types were included, such as blank-filling, table-completion, cloze procedures, multiple choice, flow-chart, and open-ended questions. These allowed for the testing of a variety of micro-listening skills.
29. Marking was carried out by a group of experienced markers who attended a standardization session. Some changes were made to the initial marking scheme in the light of the discussion at the meeting. During the marking period, there were two rounds of check-marking by the Chief Examiner and, at the end of the period, scripts which were found to be at the borderline of two levels were scrutinized again.
30. Grammar and spelling mistakes in candidates' answers were not penalised unless they resulted in a different word or occurred in certain set expressions, such as job or course titles.
31. The easiest items
A total of 8 items attained a correctness rate above 90%, suggesting they were quite easy for the 2007 cohort of candidates: 6(i), 3(i), 6(iv), 18b(ii), 8(i), 15(i), 1(iv) and 5. Except for 1(iv), all the items enjoyed good discrimination indices, which means that they were able to discriminate between high-scoring and low-scoring candidates.
32. The hardest items
In general, only about a quarter of the candidates were able to answer the six hardest items in the test, 21(iii), 20, 21(i), 15(ii), 3(ix) and 9(ii). Although these items were harder to get right, they all attained very healthy discrimination indices.
33. General comments on candidates' performance
 - 33.1 Numbers
In previous Chief Examiner's reports, the importance of listening to numbers was highlighted. In the present paper, Section IV (Q13) primarily tested this particular skill. It is gratifying that candidates in this round performed better with these items. However, 13(ii) proved

to be challenging; a total of 42% of the candidates were not awarded the mark for this item. The item demanded that candidates retrieve from the aural text ‘the median age of the working population in HK in 2006’. The suggested answer is ‘38’, given by the following segment in the aural text:

“They say that by 2033, the population will have grown to 8 million in Hong Kong... 8.3 million actually ... and the median age will be 49. From 38, what it is now, to 49.”

A predictable wrong answer would be ‘49’ as this was the number mentioned in the text, but weaker candidates’ scripts revealed a host of other erroneous numbers including ‘39’, ‘48’, and ‘45’, suggesting that weaker candidates had not read the question carefully.

33.2 Context

Weaker candidates are also reminded that good listening means making sense of what one thinks has been said by looking at the context and interpreting (and re-interpreting) the smaller constituents (e.g. a sound or a word) in an attempt to form a coherent message. One example to illustrate the importance of meaning and context is 3(iv), a cloze item. The cloze sentence that demanded the one-word answer reads like this:

“John feels that nursing ... and the tradition has always been to teach by the (iv) bedside.”

The text that contains the answer reads as follows:

“Well, in nursing, ever since the 19th century, nursing has been vocational education... and the evolution of nurse education began with teaching by the bedside round about the era of Florence Nightingale in the 1800s...”

Wrong answers to this item included ‘nurses’, ‘hospital’ and ‘doctors’, which point to a lack of morpho-syntactical knowledge as these wrong answers did not fit the sentence structure. Other candidates were closer to the mark and gave answers such as ‘backside’ or ‘badside’. These are correct words or phrases but simply have no meaning in this context; they are, however, very close to the correct answer ‘bedside’, which should have been guessable from the surrounding context and situation for candidates who had slightly misheard.

33.3 Discourse markers

Two of the items, 9(i) and 9(ii) in Question No. 9 proved to be quite difficult because many weaker candidates failed to attend to a discourse marker which signalled the boundary of the required answers. The question required that the candidates retrieve ‘factors for consideration when providing nursing education in Hong Kong’. The suggested answers for 9(i) and 9(ii) were in fact two pairs of

contradictions or contrasts, rather than just two simple phrases. The answers are underlined in the following segment:

“So we need to consider how the students are influenced by university and how they are influenced by or socialized by the hospital environment? This is an important factor for us to consider. The other thing is that in Hong Kong, I believe we’re not very good at the linking of the curriculum between the teaching which occurs in the university and the practice which happens in the hospital.”

Hence the suggested answer for 9(i) is a contrastive pair, ‘the influence of university vs. the influence of hospital’. Likewise, the answer for 9(ii) is ‘the linking between (i) the university curriculum and (ii) hospital practice’. The boundary of the two pairs in the aural text is marked by “this is an important factor for us to consider. The other thing is that...”. Failing to note this boundary, many weaker candidates responded by inserting the first part of the first pair, ‘the influence by university’ as an answer for 9(i) and the second of the first pair, ‘the influence by hospital’, as the answer for 9(ii), missing out totally the correct answer for 9(ii).

34. Advice to candidates

- Attend primarily to meaning when listening; you are encouraged to interpret and re-interpret smaller linguistic constituents when trying to understand the message;
- Exercise care in proof-reading and re-examine language in context;
- Continue to enhance the skill of listening to numbers; and
- Develop stronger awareness of discourse markers when taking notes.

Paper 4 (Speaking)

35. As in previous administrations, candidates performed well on the scales of Organisation & Cohesion and Interacting with Peers, and less well on Grammatical Accuracy and, in particular, Pronunciation, Stress & Intonation, Reading Aloud with Meaning and Explaining Language Matters to Peers.
36. The typical problems exhibited by candidates while reading aloud a poem and a prose passage were attempting the pronunciation of unfamiliar words (such as ‘pearly’ or ‘aroma’), pronouncing consonant clusters (such as ‘praise’ or ‘drainboard’) and conveying the appropriate meaning through word or sentence stress and intonation. Candidates found it especially difficult to use an appropriate intonation to convey meaning and at the same time read the poem in an effective way.
37. With regard to Explaining Language Matters, some candidates were able to

identify errors or problems in a student's composition, but were unable to offer any explanation as to why the student might have made the error or offer any relevant suggestions as to how the student might improve the particular problem. Some candidates frequently made very general suggestions such as 'read more books' or 'do more drills'. Such suggestions do not demonstrate that a candidate has the ability or knowledge required of a teacher to discuss language matters in a professional context.

Paper 5 (Classroom Language Assessment)

38. A total of 440 candidates were assessed between mid-January and April 2007. The pass rate was consistently high with 92.7 % attaining at least Level 3 or above in all the four scales of Grammatical Accuracy; Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation; Language of Interaction; and Language of Instruction.
39. Overall, average candidates performed reasonably well. There were also some impressive language users among the stronger candidates.
40. Grammatical Accuracy
 - 40.1 Most candidates were able to communicate fairly accurately and instances of communication being impeded as a result of grammatical inaccuracy were not common. Many candidates too were confident in using complex structures, especially the stronger ones. The ability to quickly recognize errors and self-correct was also evident among these candidates.
 - 40.2 Despite the general improvement, a range of ability was still discernible. While the stronger candidates demonstrated with great ease truly idiomatic English, a few weaker candidates were found to be making persistent basic errors and their language displayed little structural complexity.
 - 40.3 Problem areas generally included the omission of articles, the use of the wrong tense/aspect, incorrect subject-verb agreement, faulty prepositions and erroneous sentence structures. Notably, indirect questions still posed problems to some candidates, as in 'Do you know what is the name of the boy?' There were also some occasional problems with the use of idiomatic expressions and first language interference.
41. Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation
 - 41.1 Pronunciation of sounds, sentence stress and intonation patterns were generally accurate and the best candidates demonstrated not only accuracy but also fluency.
 - 41.2 Problems continued to revolve around some typical speech errors such as intonation patterns (e.g. the lack of yes/no rise or terminal

fall in statements and wh-questions), consonant clusters (e.g. /fr/ as in 'free' and /kl/ as in 'clothes') and final consonants which were not pronounced (e.g. 'balanced' and 'wanted'). Some candidates mispronounced the vowels of some words (e.g. 'won' and 'game') and failed to distinguish between long/short vowels (e.g. 'sleep/slip' and 'bean/bin'). A few sounds like /l/, /r/, /v/ and /θ/ also proved difficult for some candidates and communication could be impeded as a result, as in 'fly (fry) an egg'.

42. Language of Interaction

- 42.1 Many candidates demonstrated confidence and ease in the interactive role and proved effective in giving encouragement and acknowledgement to students' efforts. Interaction was also fostered by questioning, prompting and eliciting responses. On the whole, the language of interaction appeared natural and spontaneous.
- 42.2 Some weaknesses noted were the failure to respond appropriately to students' incomplete or wrong answers and to guide them to produce the correct responses; an over-reliance on direct yes/no questions, thus not giving interaction full scope; and in some cases, the inability to use language effectively to monitor student behaviour and encourage participation.

43. Language of Instruction

- 43.1 In general, most candidates showed a keen awareness of the need for clear instructions and signalling for tasks and activities. Instructions were often given in a systematic manner and explanations were usually clear.
- 43.2 Though there were some isolated instances of over-rehearsed lessons and candidates who relied rather too heavily on notes written on slides, many candidates were able to use English naturally and their discourse was coherent.
- 43.3 A few weaker candidates apparently failed to use clear language suited to the students' level when explaining vocabulary items. In rare cases, the amount of teacher talk proved insufficient for assessment purposes.