
FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH

Level 2
Report on the Examination

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Component 1 Reading

Some students sat this examination as an on-screen test. This report covers the on-screen test as well as the written paper.

Just over 1000 students entered the Level 2 Reading test in November 2014. The source texts, based on the theme of driving, were all well-received and clearly relevant to the candidature. That this test was taken a few days prior to the tragic death of five teenagers in a road accident seemed almost prescient but also emphasized the importance of the source texts placed before Functional Skills students.

The multiple choice questions demonstrated success rates ranging from 91% on Q1 to 39% on Q5. This was a simple information retrieval question to which 318 students gave the correct answer. Almost as many (311) selected “RED recommends 47 hours of professional lessons” when the text actually says “The Driving Standards Agency recommends 47 hours of professional tuition” – a somewhat worrying misreading. On the whole, though, performance on the multiple choice questions was better than that seen in June this year. Unfortunately, it has also become necessary to offer some guidance on the actual mechanics of answering these questions, as too many students seem ill-equipped in this regard. It is imperative that students write the answer letter clearly in the box, preferably in upper case. Should they wish to change their mind, they should cross out the initial attempt and write the new attempt clearly next to the box. This will ensure that the examiner knows precisely which letter they have chosen and can then mark the answer accordingly. Over-writing the first attempt is likely to produce an answer which is not sufficiently legible and the mark will not be given. Any attempt to “hedge bets” by putting two letters – “A or C” or “A/C” will result in no mark.

It is the view of the Principal Examiner that some students regard multiple choice questions as easy and therefore spend less time than they should on ensuring a careful reading and full understanding of the texts and how to eliminate the wrong answers.

Question 13: Almost 42% of students achieved full marks, compared with 53% in June, which is somewhat disappointing. Once again, far too many - 22% of students still seem to have no idea how to approach this question, resulting in an award of 0 marks. It is even more puzzling that 35% - scored 2 marks, which means that they do know how to approach this question; cite a correct purpose with appropriate exemplification in one half of the question then fail to do so in the other half. Again, several students used the wrong source for this question.

Question 14: This question was very successful this series, with a mean mark of 4.7 and over 35% achieving full marks. It was gratifying to see such an improvement in correct selection of 6 specific items. A small proportion (just over 2%) scored no marks on this question, because, in answer to the task of “listing six things you need to know in order to book the Junior Ferrari experience”, they offered generic statements such as “how old you need to be” or “how much it costs”. Such answers could be offered without any reference to the text and therefore cannot be assessed in terms of reading.

Question 15: This was particularly challenging for some students. The task required students to read the newspaper article containing information about a number of new proposals for young drivers, summarise these and the arguments against the proposals. A significant number misinterpreted the instruction and gave their own views against the proposals. Credit was given for

such responses but since these were not taken from the text thereby showing evidence of reading and selecting, they could not gain full marks. However, it was very pleasing to see the thoughtful, logical ideas generated by these proposals. The mean mark was 3.9 and 39% of students gained 4 or above. Far fewer overlong responses are being offered, indicating that some very good teaching of summary skills is taking place.

Question 16: This question remains the poor relation on this paper, with more students scoring no marks (30%) than full marks (23%). In the middle are those students who score 2 marks (24%) indicating that they do know what presentational devices are but can only offer and explain the effectiveness of one rather than the two required by the question. The only advice worth offering to schools/colleges here is to ensure that whoever is teaching this specification has accessed past papers, mark schemes and Principal Examiner reports and trains their students for the requirements of this question. One other issue which requires clarification relates to hyperlinks. These are bound to appear in a photograph of a webpage but, in themselves, are functional rather than presentational. In order to gain credit for these in Q8, students need to comment on the appearance of the links, i.e. “there are red links at the top of the page”; “links in boxes appear down the side of the text”.

What follows is taken verbatim from Summer 2013 report, was repeated in the January, March and June 2014 reports, and is offered again here.

‘Successive reports have commented on this area and pointed out the very simple fact that students who have clearly been taught what presentational devices are succeed in this question: those who do not know what they are score zero. Schools/colleges are advised to access the mark scheme for this examination to see what is acceptable in terms of presentational devices and ensure that their students are equally well informed. Some students still fail to complete the box requiring them to nominate the source they perceive as more effective in terms of presentation and some students continue to write about both sources, which means they cannot get more than half marks. Schools/colleges are once again reminded that students are being asked to comment on the effectiveness of the source in terms of its presentation, not its content or intention.

“Paragraphs” are a structural device of writing, not a presentational device, and will not be accepted as such in this question on Level 2.’

In summary then, the mean mark of 19.9 on the paper was somewhat lower than in June and achieved by just over 55% of students. This represents a continuing consistent performance overall with some peaks and troughs of achievement on individual questions. With the advent of the new GCSE English specification and its much more rigorous terminal assessment, the role of Level 2 Functional Skills takes on new importance. The skills of close reading, understanding, selection, identification of bias, implication and point of view; purpose, audience and summary are all vital to success in GCSE English Language. Functional Skills therefore is an excellent vehicle in which to practise and develop these skills, possibly in Year 9 or 10, as preparation for GCSE. Those schools/colleges and teachers who are already working with such commitment on Functional Skills are very well-prepared for the use of this assessment as a stepping stone to the single entry GCSE or maybe as an alternative, credible English qualification for students unable to access the new GCSE.

This report has, of necessity, concentrated on areas for improvement identified during the marking of the assessment. However, the overall impression is one of well-taught, engaged students with developing ability in many of the skills listed above and that is a testament to the dedication and professionalism of the teachers of this specification.

Finally, the Principal Examiner would like to reiterate once again, a plea made several times now, which alludes to faint responses. The examination answer booklet clearly instructs students to “use black ink or black ball point pen” yet barely legible responses continue to appear. Please ensure that students entering for this examination are equipped with a black pen and use sufficient pressure to render their response prominent and legible.

Component 2 – Writing

Some students sat this examination as an on-screen test. This report covers the on-screen test as well as the written paper.

With a consistent approach to assessment, in terms of question style and mark schemes, this examination provides a rigorous and fair test of writing skills for students. It has established itself as a strong currency in regards to educational progression and employment and for some students this qualification may be the only formal English qualification of value that they have achieved. Schools/colleges are increasingly confident in entering students who are well able to meet the demands of the Level 2 paper and consequently there are few very weak, or inappropriately entered, students within this cohort. This examination is excellent preparation for the GCSE English/English Language Unit 1 and is well suited to post-16 students in terms of accessibility and clarity of assessment. In the context of recent reform, where re-sit GCSE may not be an option for students, the need to achieve a creditable qualification in English is paramount for some students and this is where the Level 2 qualification will have a significant role to play.

Question 1

This question asked students to write a letter to Jenny Radcliffe, an official of the local council. The purpose of the letter was to put across views in favour of, or against, a council proposal to ban smoking in local parks.

The stimulus material provided students with an incentive to write, but not many pointers in terms of content. To the very great credit of the vast majority of students, answers showed considerable insight into the issue of smoking in public places and a real willingness to engage in the debate, irrespective of the position they were taking.

There were some well-argued cases on the smoker's behalf, often extolling the right of the individual to damage his lungs in the face of bureaucratic rules and regulations, often pointing out that the evidence of harmful passive smoking in the open air was patchy at best. As ever with topics which fringe into the PSHE curriculum there were the usual sections on health issues and extensive knowledge of what damage could be caused to our systems. The most surprising argument to me was that dogs are seemingly likely to see cigarette ends as food and consume them hungrily when off the leash, resulting in illness and vast vets' bills. Others pointed out that smoking in parks provided an opportunity for disaffected youth to gather, with consequential anti-social behaviour when smoking was accompanied by the consumption of alcohol.

The best students adopted an appropriately serious tone in putting forward their case, using extensive vocabulary and an effective range of sentences. Where students assumed a strongly persuasive stance the use of rhetorical question was often found accompanied by the device of the rhetorical triad. These devices were often successful but occasionally students lost some impact through repetition and over-use. Many students were to be commended on the use of emotional language in presenting their cases.

Weaker students often met the mark Band 2 scheme descriptor 'presents some information on a complex subject'. Whilst much of what was presented was relevant, there was little depth and very rare exploration or deepening of the basic points made. Other students who scored 5 or fewer marks for content also met the descriptor, 'some success in using a style of writing appropriate to

purpose', with unfortunate lapses into an aggressive or sarcastic tone unleavened by wit or appropriate vocabulary.

Question 2

For this question, students were asked to write a complaint, via email, to the customer services team at achildstorybook.com, a website specialising in books and gifts for children.

The stimulus for this question incorporated an advertisement of the sort now commonly found on the web, indicating the company's claims to quality in terms of turnaround, range, accessibility etc. These claims, in turn, provided students with areas that they could then talk about in their email.

There was considerable underperformance in this question in relation to Question 1. On Question 1, some 63% of students achieved a mark of at least 6 for content. On Question 2, only 55% hit this mark. Whilst a number of students may have been disadvantaged by spending too long on Question 1, others wrote with little energy or conviction, dropping into a rather formulaic listing of faults linked to the advertisement. Students need to understand that writing in the real world may often involve seemingly mundane tasks, but there is every need in all cases to write effectively and to the point.

The main problem seemed to be the lack of any real detail on what had been ordered and what was wrong; students often referred to 'the book' or 'the toy' and simply said that it was not what they expected without any detail on the damage. There was better use of detail from those who went down the 'the website is terrible' route or those who had become involved in tangled financial transactions; obviously IT and money issues are more readily discussed. Where damage to a book was mentioned it was often unpleasant or inappropriate scribble and drawings which were the problem. Delays in delivery, and the consequent distressing heartbreak of Christmas and birthday mornings, were regular features.

The best students wrote clearly, often establishing a credible context through the use of a relevant and not too lengthy narrative scenario. Such students often chose one element of the advertisement, such as the 24 hour turnaround or the wide selection of goods for sale, and used this as the basis for a credible complaint. Tone was generally diplomatic, and only occasionally would strong students weaken their response by resorting to abuse or threats.

Weaker students often attempted to cover all aspects of the company's activities and therefore provided little detail or depth in their writing, but perhaps the main concern, to echo to some extent the earlier point, is that of appropriateness of tone and language. In weaker responses, students often dropped into informal, and undisciplined language that pushed them towards Band 1. In this weaker group, some students were able to 'present some information' (Band 2) alongside 'limited success with a style of writing appropriate to purpose'. Straddling both bands, such students often gained a mark of 4 or 3 for content.

Accuracy

A Level 2 pass in Functional English is no mean achievement and students with such a qualification are well able and prepared to take on GCSE English and other educational qualifications. The standard remains high and AQA are confident that rigorous procedures are in place to ensure that success at this level is not devalued through mark inflation. A mark of 4 is the target for students who hope to gain a Level 2 qualification. At this mark, the mark scheme indicates that students produce writing in which 'meaning is clear'. This does not, of course, mean

that the writing is without error but it does suggest that students achieving such marks would be able to handle themselves in employment, further education and the wider world. In this series, approximately 58% of all students gained a mark 4 for accuracy on Question 1 and 50% of students gained the same mark for Question 2.

Areas in need of improvement

Sentence demarcation: time after time this is the single most evident area of weakness. Some students write effective sentences but fail to use full stops and capital letters, using instead commas or other punctuation. A smaller group of students may use full stops but fail to use capital letters to begin the sentences. In both cases, whilst meaning remains clear the punctuation is inaccurate and the student would struggle to gain 4 marks. Other students generate effective sentences but fail to use any punctuation. One examiner noted that it is not the complexity or otherwise of sentences that underpin errors, as follows: 'This was not always when compound or complex sentences were attempted; often a string of simple statement sentences was devoid of any end of sentence punctuation.' In such cases, meaning is often not clear and students are highly unlikely to gain a mark of 4. A final group of students do not generate effective sentences and they are unlikely to gain marks outside of Band 1 (1-2 marks).

Grammar and usage: Standard English is clearly evident at this level and usually, at a mark of 4 or above, very competently produced. Errors with subject/verb agreement and tense are perhaps the most common grammatical errors, perhaps linked to speech patterns as in the common 'we was'. Where patterns of such usage are evident, targeted remedial action is necessary.

Spelling: this is an interesting area. Most common words are spelt accurately and where this is not the case, the student is likely to gain a mark of 1 or 2. The answer, as I have indicated in many of these reports, is a programme of reading aimed at building vocabulary and spelling. Of course the perennial errors crop up: 'recieved', 'appauling', confusion over 'where/were/we're' and 'there/their/they're' and so on.

I would like to make a final point for those schools/colleges where students take on-screen assessments. It would appear that students taking this route into assessment produce weaker scores on the accuracy side. It is often difficult for an examiner to distinguish between a spelling/grammar/usage mistake and a typographical error (a 'typo'). What is assessed is the final product of what the student has typed in. Examiners are not expected to give wholesale benefit of the doubt to students whose writing is peppered with typos so the mark for accuracy will quite rightly reflect the descriptors in the mark scheme. It is very important, therefore, that schools/colleges train students to check over their work and use a dictionary if necessary. It is disheartening for an examiner to be forced to give a mark of 2 for accuracy when the student's abilities and talent, as indicated by a mark for content of 6 or more, are clearly quite strong.

Component 3 – Speaking, Listening and Communication

Introduction

It has been pleasing to note the honesty with which most schools/colleges have responded to the fact that a student being entered for a level is not necessarily a guarantee that the level is ultimately awarded. It was also pleasing to note that in many schools/colleges suitable records are being kept and are being retained for an adviser to monitor. Please note, as with GCSE, schools/colleges are required to retain all records from one adviser visit to the next.

Although group discussion only is required for Level 1, it did not automatically follow that it was the 'easier' component for those aiming at Level 2. There were quite frequent examples where students were able to perform better when working as an individual than they were when contributing to a group.

A number of advisers reported that when they contacted Heads of English in schools/colleges, the Head of English was unaware that Functional Skills English was in fact being taught there. This problem is not easily solved, but any teachers of Functional Skills reading this report should check that the Head of English knows of its existence in the schools/college, as they are likely to be the first person contacted regarding visits and administration.

Schools/colleges should note that AQA regularly produces DVD support material for this specification, which is available online. The material for 2012 was filmed in Rochdale. We have since filmed material specifically for Functional Skills in a school in Wolverhampton. The participants were Year 9 students, as Year 9 form a considerable part of the cohort. This material will be available in Autumn 2013 and should be watched by all teachers assessing students for this specification. We aim to film older students in the coming year, which will represent another part of the cohort.

It is important to point out, though, that whatever the age of the student, the same principles apply around task-setting and assessment.

Tasks

There are things to consider when setting up groups and tasks. It must be stressed that group work will not merely happen by putting students together and expecting them to get on with it. Group work needs exemplifying and its skills need drawing out before assessment begins. Groups need focused tasks with definite end results, and individuals within the group may need to assume certain roles, such as chair, initial speaker, summariser etc. Not all of them need to be assessed each time. Experience shows it is hard to assess more than three students at any one time.

It also helps if the task itself is distinctly 'functional' – one obvious criterion for being functional is that the talk could be linked to that which is seen in a workplace in its broadest sense. Of course this inevitably involves some form of simulation if the talk is taking place in a classroom, but much better this than talk which is based on literary sources, which does not work well in a functional context.

Example of good tasks were filmed in Wolverhampton, where students had to plan a school event (crucially they arrived with some research already done), or provide ideas for catering at a local

theme park. In both cases the local dimension, alongside the need to research, plan and resolve, led to some fruitful work at all levels of ability.

Much good functional work has involved students discussing school and college issues with important institutional figures within their school/college. Interestingly the adults (and even senior students) seem to enjoy this as much as those being assessed.

In the vast majority of cases the individual presentation is still being delivered through a talk to the class or group. This year we have seen some good presentations emerging from the conclusion of the group task, and others in which an element of rhetoric is required. Needing to persuade your listener towards a point of view can lead to engaged and engaging talk.

Record keeping/standardisation

It must be stressed again that advisers need to see a full and efficient set of records, which include all students entered since the last advisory visit. Where such records indicate that there has been some form of internal standardising, then they carry a greater sense of reliability.

Conclusion

Good Speaking, Listening and Communication work in Functional English can be fun to participate in and fun to watch. Advisers have received warm welcomes in many schools/colleges and seen students who are really keen to do well and to project themselves as young people with good interpersonal skills.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

UMS conversion calculator www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion