AQA

FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH

ENGLISH

Level 1
Report on the Examination

4720
March 2015

Version: 1.0

Component 1 Reading

This report covers both the on-screen and the paper versions of this test.

The theme of this series was sport and both source texts were well received.

Q2:   Despite some concern expressed about the ambiguity of this question, there was a clearly correct answer, namely that "more than 20 children can attend the birthday parties". However, substantial numbers of students failed to spot this vital piece of information because it was contained in the very last sentence of the source. The clear message here is that the whole of the source must be perused carefully, before eliminating any of the options.

Q6:   This also proved problematic, with a large number of students choosing "make their child take up a sport" as the desired course of action after reading the leaflet, when the correct answer was "buy one of the company's services". Oddly, this answer directly linked to Q1, in which 70% of students correctly identified the main purpose of the leaflet as "persuade parents to use a SuperSport service".

Q7:   Asked students to focus on ways in which sport was good for children and ways in which parents could help their children to learn to become good sports. The first part of this question was very well done with the majority of students achieving full marks. When approaching 7b, however, a surprising number of students seemed to ignore the source text and offer ideas from their own experience, none of which could be credited. Students must remember that this is a test of reading and all the answers must come from the source text. The other error concerned a failure to focus on the parents' behaviour rather than the children's.

It was very pleasing to see that performance on Q8 continues to improve with increasing numbers of students achieving full marks when writing about presentation. This is a testament to the hard work of teachers focusing on the precise requirements of the paper, to the ultimate benefit of their students.

Component 2 Writing

Overview

The Level 1 writing paper, with two questions containing stimulus material leading into a task which is supported by bullet points, enables students to use some of the information in the question. There is an element of problem solving and functional thinking in completing the task. At this level, schools/colleges now very rarely enter students who have little or no chance of getting inside Band 2 Mark Scheme descriptors. Students seemed generally confident and able to meet the requirements of the questions with a very high percentage of students on both Question 1 and Question 2 hitting at least 4 marks for content. It is the view of examiners that a majority of students in this series, at the top end of the distribution with total marks of 15 or more, would be well suited to the demands of Level 2 and should be encouraged to progress. Students whose marks fall below a total of 15 may well need a little more in the way of skill development before they progress on to Level 2. Close examination of the schools/college's mark profile would be very useful in this context.

Question 1

This question asked students to respond to a council leaflet inviting readers to provide suggestions to 'improve the waste ground in the High Street'. The stimulus material in the question pointed students towards the kinds of development that might be possible, such as a swimming pool, car park or shops. Students, of course, were not restricted to these suggestions.

It was apparent that a significant number of students saw the question as request for suggestions to *clean up the litter* on the waste ground, rather than to *develop* the waste ground. This alternative approach was discussed at the standardising meeting and the Principal Examiner instructed examiners not to penalise students who took such an alternative approach.

The best answers made clear suggestions for improvement of the waste ground by indicating a preferred development or number of developments. This was generally supported by arguments in favour of the development in line with the second bullet point relating to benefits to the community. Students, for example, who chose to write about a swimming pool pointed out the benefits to the health of both young and old, and the enjoyment that could be found through swimming. They often indicated the lack of a swimming pool in their own area and the need to travel some distance to enjoy such a facility. Enthusiastic students wrote well about the features that such a swimming pool might contain, such as slides, tubes and wave machines. Other developments that generated a lot of support were youth clubs, football pitches, skate parks and cinemas. It was interesting that a number of students saw an opportunity to enhance the environment through parklands and wildlife sanctuaries. Some students suggested an urban farm that would provide produce as well as a facility for visitors.

Where students had chosen the alternative approach as outlined above, good students wrote effectively about the need to provide litter bins, a regular cleaning service and also the possibility of using volunteers in a campaign targeted at the waste ground.

Weaker students provided one or two sentences, often barely on topic, the structure of the letter often not evident. These students attempted to provide some information in an often unsequenced response which was not suitable for purpose or audience. The percentage of students falling into this category, with responses which met Band 1 descriptors from the Mark Scheme, was fortunately very low.

Question 2

This question asked students to write a leaflet about internet safety for young people in schools, colleges or workplaces.

There was virtually no issue with interpretation on this question and it was apparent that students saw the need to provide clear advice through text rather than visual illustration, although many students took the opportunity to use design features such as headlines, bullet points and text boxes. Many students also used punctuation, such as the exclamation mark, to good effect in emphasising key points.

It is to the credit of schools/colleges that virtually every student understood some of the dangers that the internet can throw in the path of young people. Good answers pointed out the ways in which excessive gaming, for example, can eat into the concentration and time that young people have at their disposal. Many students, using the same example, warned their readers that taking time off school to indulge in internet gaming was a recipe for disaster that could stretch into adult life. Students also wrote well about the dangers of gambling and looking at unsuitable material. However, the strength of many good answers was in the clear advice that was given to readers. The dangers of making contact with strangers was the most often warned against action, although this was followed closely by warnings about providing personal information or uploading photographs. Good answers were well organised around the bullet points and used the imperative mood to very good effect. In many cases a strong warning or piece of advice was supported by a clear explanation which reinforced the message being put across. Quite a few students adopted an informative leaflet style - giving website links, pictures and telephone numbers.

Weaker answers tended to address the reader very bluntly with one or two simple commands, usually beginning with 'don't', often in lower case. Some students wrote very little so the clearest descriptor was 'attempts to...' However, very few students in Band 1 failed to provide evidence of the topic. Sadly, there was a higher proportion of blank responses for this question than in previous series. Students should be encouraged to complete two questions as it is often possible to glean some marks from even a very brief response.

Accuracy

Perhaps the most important descriptor for Band 2 achievement is 'meaning is clear' and in this series the vast majority of students reached this band.

Band 2 nevertheless represents a modest level of achievement with written Standard English. Students in this band would typically provide some grammatical sentences, syntax would be largely appropriate for Standard English and the spelling of common words would be mostly accurate. When these are not present, the student's work will fall into Band 1 for accuracy.

The construction of grammatical sentences with clear full stops and capital letters remains elusive. Some examiners also noted an inconsistency in the use of upper case with weaker students displaying hit and miss approach. Some students made errors such as omitting words which could have been self-corrected through proof-reading.

I would also like to emphasise the importance of checking writing. This is particularly significant for those students taking on-screen assessments or providing word-processed answers. Also, when students produce very short answers, with unchecked typos dominating the reader's experience, it is highly unlikely that the student would score well for either content or accuracy.

Examiners noted the following:

- Basic spelling rules not evident, such as 'i before e except after c, y changes to i when you add es',
- Many errors with the word 'I' failing to be written as a capital - even when writing 'i'm, i'll, i've' (sic)
- There were many errors with 'of and off', 'our, are, or', 'gonna', 'their selfs', 'imform(ation)'.
- The word 'safety' was often transcribed incorrectly from the question as 'saftey'.
- Some students had issues with tense, agreement and word order.
- Quite a few they're/their/there issues.

Component 3 Speaking, Listening and Communication

It was pleasing to note that in many schools/colleges suitable records are being kept and are being retained for an adviser to monitor. Please note, though, that 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. This would suggest that the skills of group discussion need to be taught and practised before assessment takes place.

Schools/colleges should note that AQA regularly produces DVD support material for this specification, which is available online. The material for 2014-15 was filmed in Newham and shows post -16 students. Previous DVDs from Rochdale (2012) and Wolverhampton (2013) should also be used to access the standard. DVD support material should be watched by all teachers assessing students for this specification.

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 3 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 Newham students discussed welfare issues in their college and 'stop and search' as a key issue within their community. In all 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. This is exemplified in the Newham DVD. 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 student 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 and Listening 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.

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 school/college, as they are likely to be the first person contacted regarding visits and administration.

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