

GCSE

English Language

8700/1

Report on the exam

November 2021

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Again, like last year, this has been an unusual exam series. Entry patterns have been very different from those normally seen in previous series and students had a very different experience in preparation for these exams. It is therefore more difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the range of student responses seen in this series and those seen in a normal November series. The smaller entry also means that there is less evidence available for examiners to comment on.

In this report, senior examiners will summarise the performance of students in this series in a way that is as helpful as possible to teachers preparing future cohorts while taking into account the unusual circumstances and limited evidence available.

Areas where students excelled

Students responded well to Ugwu's experiences as a new employee to a university professor. The piece was engaging and the students recognised his changing emotions, as well as the writer's use of contrast – between Ugwu's old familial home and that of his employer. Question 1 enabled more students to attain full marks, with many more students writing straightforward statements or short answers for each statement. Examiners noted that there were more secure answers to Question 4. Students showed more confidence in articulating their evaluation of the statement, as well as in using textual evidence.

The narrative and descriptive options for the writing section were tackled well; the narrative option of a 'new beginning' presented a wide range of responses and the descriptive option, using an image of people walking home during sunset, was familiar and therefore immediately accessible. Responses to this option offered more in the way of structural shifts such as sunset and sunrise, or the emptying streets. Some answers included a sense of the weariness of the travellers, or indeed personified the city itself as lethargic. The narrative option was explored with engagement. Students included many new beginnings, for example divorce or a new job or school. Some students wrote using science fiction and apocalyptic or environmental pieces, which used the question prompt of 'a new beginning' with confidence.

Areas where students struggled

Examiners noted that students wrote with less confidence about the effects of language for Question 2. It was felt that there was an increase in students identifying items of language but then struggling to explain the meaning and effects of these features. For this year's question, some students drifted with Ugwu's impressions without relating these ideas to specific words or phrases. The selection of evidence was again an area of challenge where students selected less helpful details from the text. There were, for example, many literal interpretations of 'hedges trimmed so flat they looked like tables wrapped with leaves,' and 'itched to lay his cheek down'. Students were more successful with language such as 'choked' which was seen quickly as metaphorical, as well as the houses 'like polite, well-dressed men'.

Question 3 also showed a decline in confidence and in detail. Many answers were generalised and students often struggled to comment on the structural shifts. The outline of events was often reiterated without any kind of comment on effect, and students found it difficult to notice shifts in setting, time and tension. Students did not often write with an understanding of the whole extract and there were some very short or unattempted answers.

There appeared to be an increase in 'learned' responses to Question 5. These were quickly noted by examiners. Students could be reminded that although these may provide a starting point for their own ideas, learned responses do not offer many opportunities for originality.

Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
<p>AO1 - Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas.</p> <p>Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.</p>	<p>Selecting information from outside the lines specified by the question.</p> <p>Selecting information about the wrong character.</p>
<p>AO2 - Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.</p>	<p>Explanation of lengthy quotations for Q2, meaning that the comment was content based rather than language based.</p> <p>Responding to imagery in a literal rather than figurative manner.</p>
<p>AO4 - Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.</p>	<p>Selecting textual references that do not support the idea or that are too long/unfocused.</p> <p>Confusing characters and analysis by referring only to 'he' rather than specifying the character.</p>
<p>AO5 - Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences. Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.</p>	<p>Listing the details in the picture prompt, rather than allowing the imaginative ideas to develop from it.</p> <p>Writing consciously about the image and therefore struggling with the register and purpose, eg 'in the image I can see'.</p>
<p>AO6 - Candidates must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation. (This requirement must constitute 20% of the marks for each specification as a whole).</p>	<p>Using contrived language.</p> <p>Uncontrolled, or an absence of, punctuation.</p> <p>Uncontrolled sentence and paragraph lengths.</p>

Question 1

Students tended to select precise details from the source with greater confidence this year, where the information was stated simply and clearly to gain one mark per statement. Although it is possible to attain more than one mark per statement, it is more straightforward for students to respond with less complicated ideas. Students were able to select information about the professor with confidence and there were far fewer potentially unhelpful inferences. Students found the four things accurately, without pausing midway through a phrase, which has caused some difficulty in previous series.

Common misunderstandings

Many students decided that the professor was rude and unpleasant as they read that he ‘did not return greetings’ rather than ‘he did not **always** return greetings.’ The latter indicates that he is not wholly without manners and links to other details which show he is often distracted. Students tended to confuse themselves when reading ‘he’ and then writing about Ugwu rather than the professor. Some students chose details from outside lines one to four and so could be advised to identify the correct lines clearly before they begin.

Question 2

Students were asked to focus on the effects of language in reference to Ugwu’s impression of the city. Many students were able to identify Ugwu’s amazement and that he was impressed with the setting in comparison to his own village. Some higher attaining answers explored similes describing the bungalows ‘like the sky’ and like ‘polite well-dressed men’ – explaining clearly the beauty and neatness of the setting. Some were able to link the neatness of the setting to ‘itched’ and ‘choked’ showing Ugwu’s excitement and his amazement.

Common misunderstandings

Less successful answers tended to drift away from analysing language and instead focused on discussing Ugwu’s general impressions. There were straightforward assertions that the university grounds were nicer than that with which Ugwu was familiar, as well as very literal explanations of hedges that looked like tables. It was noted that students were less confident in extending their explanations and were less confident in drawing together details from the text on a conceptual level. There were some lengthy answers that did not select specific textual references or paraphrased the text. Using long and unfocused quotations leads students to write about content rather than language. Students could be advised to use short, precise quotations to enable them to direct their analysis to the word or phrase that drew their attention and shaped their understanding.

Question 3

The structural shifts in this extract were generally felt to be straightforward. There were shifts in setting – both in the past/present with Ugwu’s familial home in contrast to that of his new employer’s, and inside and outside the professor’s home. There was a pivotal moment at the glass door into the professor’s home which some students saw as a new beginning for Ugwu, as well as a moment of tension at the end of the extract with Ugwu waiting for instruction. Examiners were impressed with some answers which noted the immediate introduction to the professor – from the auntie’s perspective – and then the later meeting between Ugwu and the professor which supported her earlier views. Equally, some students were able to contrast the beauty of the natural setting outside the professor’s home, with the ‘sweet, heady’ white flowers, the hovering butterflies and ‘glistening’ lawn, against the starkness of the ‘red and white plastic flowers’ and the ‘oblivious’ professor. More successful answers noted the shifts in Ugwu’s feelings and the details of his journey which prompted these changes. These answers also tended to discuss the ending of the extract with some confidence, noting how it linked with – and extended – the details at the start.

Common misunderstandings

Responses to this question were adversely affected by students writing about content rather than structure. Many students gave a brief overview of the text but without specific details or comment, which often could have been referring to any text. There appeared to be less confidence or familiarity with the structural features, and there were many very short answers which only discussed the opening to the text.

Question 4

Both parts of the statement, ‘From the moment he arrives at Master’s compound, the writer portrays Ugwu’s feelings of pure excitement, but by the end it seems that he may be very disappointed’, were equally accessible to students. Examiners reported that students were engaged with their opinions and wrote enthusiastically about Ugwu’s excitement and then his disappointment by the end. There were more confident responses which explored whether or not Ugwu actually felt disappointment or whether he felt meeting the professor to be anticlimactic, and that he felt hesitant, uncertain or overwhelmed. There were many responses that engaged with the meaning of the pat on Ugwu’s shoulder, as well as with how he felt about the large room that ‘still seemed to have too much space’. Some students were able to identify the pivotal moment at the professor’s glass door and the momentary feeling of doubt as Ugwu recalled the coolness of his mother’s hut. In some responses this was also linked to the notion of ‘pure excitement’ in the statement and whether or not they agreed with ‘pure’. Although there appeared to be less confidence with Questions 2 and 2, students showed increased confidence with this question. The structure of the answers was generally more straightforward and students who sought to argue other interpretations did so with greater clarity.

Common misunderstandings

Students who misunderstood details in this extract, tended to do so around the nature of Ugwu’s employment and the reasons that his auntie took him to the professor’s house. Some students saw her pat on Ugwu’s shoulder to be sinister, controlling or a sign of abandonment. Some students felt that Ugwu had been forced into employment by his unpleasant aunt or that the professor was a rude and potentially unkind master. These ideas tended to come from a single, misinterpreted detail around which the rest of the answer had been constructed. Students could be reminded that textual evidence suggests meaning and interpretations, whereas re-imagining the text to support an initial idea is likely to cause difficulty. There were answers that were confused due to the over-

reliance on the pronoun 'he'. This meant that the student became muddled between the male characters and the ideas to be argued. It also meant that examiners found it increasingly difficult to follow the argument.

Question 5

Strongest responses

The descriptive option was immediately accessible due to the familiarity of the scene and many students chose to stay with the setting depicted in the image – of a bridge with pedestrians at sunset. The strongest responses which took this approach, extended this image to imagine the changes in the scene as darkness descended, or the changes in the city as it emptied of people and of traffic. Examiners enjoyed responses that included personification of the city itself, the buildings and the river. There were a few responses that imagined the setting in the past or the weariness of the city. Those responses that used the image as a starting point and imagined a sunset in a different setting or with alternative details to those in the foreground, often showed originality and were able to show more confidence with register and purpose.

The narrative option encouraged a range of ideas under the title 'a new beginning'. Many students found their ideas around familiar topics such as a new school, a new job or divorce. More successful answers, as with previous series, focused upon a short timeline with one or two focused events that were extended with description and smaller details. Some stronger responses drew on science fiction to imagine post-apocalyptic worlds, the world before – or after – humanity, or used an environmental theme. There were some responses that included the rehoming of a previously unwanted pet, a new but unexpected opportunity for someone who had given up hope, or a person breaking free from an unfulfilling situation. These stronger responses developed an idea that was engaging and that showed some connection with the subject matter. There was a feeling that the students had enjoyed this task.

Weaker responses

Examiners noticed more answers which struggled somewhat with register and purpose, referring directly to the image and listing the details shown. Listing details can also weaken the structure of a student's writing, where the structure is either confusing or arbitrary. Students could be reminded that the image is a prompt for their own, related ideas and they can offer ideas from their own imagination to provide more control over the direction of their writing. Some students had leant heavily upon 'learned' responses, the details of which are quickly recognisable and do not often add to their piece.

Less successful answers relied upon lengthy sections of direct speech and/or rushed, more superficial narrative. There were some answers which included a great many events which, therefore, could not be developed within the constraints of time.

Further support

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