

GCSE

English Language

8700/2

Report on the exam

November 2021

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Performance in this series is understandably weaker across all questions on the paper. The exception is Question 1 which is subject to significant variability between different series and is discussed in the relevant section below. In all other questions, the mean marks were lower than the average marks in November 2020. This is probably the result of ongoing uncertainty and disruption in education at both a national and local level. Students have suffered from a significant reduction in teaching time and are likely to have had considerable turmoil in preparation for this assessment in November. This inevitably affects their performance, and the evidence of this is clear to see.

The mean mark on the paper as a whole is just over 30. This is a reduction from November 2020 when the mean mark was 32. This reflects the slightly lower performance of the typical re-take cohort, the majority of whom tend to be towards the lower end of the ability range. However, it is important to record that there was a significant minority of students working at much higher levels of performance, therefore ensuring that the whole range of ability was represented to some degree.

Question paper and source texts

The source texts used in this series were based on the theme of sweets. They included an autobiographical account by Clive James of his experiences as a child eating sweets at the cinema on a Saturday morning in Australia in the 1940s; and a more scientific account of the manufacture and changing attitudes to sweets written by an unknown author in the 1860s. They were well-matched and effective in offering two different perspectives on sweets. Where one extract was nostalgic, humorous and highly enthusiastic, the other was serious-minded, judgemental and with an eye to the socio-economic context of sweet manufacture.

Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
AO1 - Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.	Lack of detailed inferences and synthesis
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.	Inferring meaning rather than commenting on effects of language use
AO3 - Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts.	Comparing different aspects in texts which were not 'like for like'
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.	Development of argument not always clearly expressed
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).	Sentence forms insufficiently varied

Question 1

Performance on Question 1 increased significantly in November 2021. The percentage of students achieving 4 marks out of a possible 4 rose to 76%, which is clearly much higher than the 10% of students who achieved 4 marks in November 2020.

The reasons for this could be to do with the nature of the statements or with the level of students' understanding or misunderstanding. There was a combination of explicit information and implicit ideas in the designated section of text in Source A, as has been the case in previous series. It is possible that the relatively familiar topic of children going to the cinema was more accessible for students than the introduction of mountain climbers looking down from a glacier in last November's source.

Common strengths in responses

The students who scored full marks were able to identify the information accurately, made effective inferences regarding the narrator's experience, and were able to track the information in the eight statements chronologically through the given extract. The most effective way to secure the four marks was also to colour in the lozenge in the answer booklet to identify the four true statements correctly.

Common misunderstandings

There was no obviously 'false' statement which was selected by students as 'true'; nor was there a particular statement which was routinely rejected as 'false' when it was in fact 'true'. According to the data, the two statements which were mostly missed by students as 'true' were statements G and H. The statement most likely to be selected as 'true' in error was statement A.

This may indicate a pattern of selection whereby students are more likely to select an early statement as true, and fail to read to the end of the list of eight statements, but this is simply a hypothesis.

What is clear is that the same advice for students is relevant: they should read through all the statements before selecting any. Remember the statements are in chronological order and should be read again and matched against the text extract in order. Once the four statements have been selected as 'true', they should be read again to check that they are correct.

Question 2

The question focused on the children in the two sources and their different experiences of childhood. Students were invited to make interpretations of the texts and make connections between the ideas they offered about childhood in two very different contexts.

There was plenty of relevant material to draw on, with the children in Source A enjoying a freewheeling, exuberant, unfettered experience of going to the cinema on a Saturday morning for an endless series of cartoons and other film entertainment. In contrast, the children in Source B were largely those employed in the sweet-making trade, forced to spend long hours hunched over their benches and artistically decorating the confectionery in the dimly lit, highly supervised environment of the Victorian factory.

Performance on this question was slightly lower than it has been in previous November series, with a mean of just below 3 marks, which is at the lower end of Level 2. This suggests that many students struggled to make any inferences or attempt to make the necessary links between the children in the two sources.

Common strengths in responses

The best responses were those where the students made interpretations about the children in Source A, identifying and explaining clearly that the children were free of responsibilities, appreciating their leisure time and enjoying long hours of entertainment. In Source B, students were able to infer ideas about the restriction on the children and the necessity of work in their lives. To achieve Level 3, students were able to make comparisons about the differing levels of responsibility and financial restrictions; their supervision, or the lack of it in Source A; and the dangers they faced and the protection from harm, or lack of it, in Source B.

To achieve the highest levels, students were clear in their interpretations, but also provided additional detail to each of their ideas and extended their understanding to incorporate concepts such as poverty and the essence and expectations of childhood.

Common misunderstandings

The weaker responses were often characterised by a poor focus on the task. Many students were distracted by the sweets themselves, and failed to focus sufficiently on the children in the source texts. Inferences relating to the sweets were rewarded as 'attempts' due to the tangential nature of the students' focus. To achieve Level 3 or higher, students must address the correct focus.

Students are advised to read the task carefully and ensure they have the correct focus. They need to make inferences related to the focus in both texts, supporting their response with appropriate textual detail. Alongside this, students should make connections between the two source texts, interpreting the similarities and differences between the children's experiences.

Question 3

The task in Question 3 invited students to engage with the language used in a short paragraph from Source A, the 20th Century text. Students are expected to identify interesting uses of language and comment on the effect they have on the reader. The focus of the question was on one sweet in particular, the Fantail.

There were many examples of language use to comment on, from the use of alliteration in 'chipped' and 'chisel' to the hyperbolic imagery of the 'strangled crying in the dark'. Many students, however, focused on a small range of images and language features: the donkey with 'lockjaw,' the triangular shaped packaging, and the 'cold chisel' chipping open people's mouths. These examples were repeatedly selected and commented upon, with more or less clarity. It was evident that the vast majority of students who were successful in identifying the hyperbole or exaggeration in the text were unable to recognise that the effect was humorous. Most students appeared to take the imagery literally, believing that children were injured by eating toffee, and that the sweets were extremely harmful.

Performance on this question followed the trend set last November with a further drop in the mean mark to just below 4, which is again at the very lower end of Level 2. This suggests that students were struggling to make more than generalised comments about the effects of the language used by the writer. Another reason for a mark in Level 1 was where students made inferences about the sweets rather than commenting on the effect of the language, as the Assessment Objective for this task requires.

Common strengths in responses

In the few high level responses seen by examiners, students offered some clear explanations of how and why the donkey had been chosen for that particular image: because of their strong jaws, their huge teeth, their propensity to eat anything or their reputation for strength and resilience. There was also clear comment on the 'strangled crying' suggesting the violence and unexpected torture of sweet eating, in contrast to the pleasure a child might anticipate.

The best responses recognised the humour intended by the writer and explored the impact of such exaggerated imagery on the reader, and the satirical, self-mocking tone in which the text was written. The very best responses in Level 4 were able to appreciate the subtleties of descriptions which were intentionally both deliciously appetising and gruesomely violent and echoed the intense pride of the boys in eating these sweets. They were also able to identify the nostalgic enthusiasm of the writer's memories, the minute detail reflecting the preciousness of the memory.

Common misunderstandings

Students often struggled to select appropriate examples of language use. Typically, many chose the isosceles triangle shaped packet and found it hard to comment effectively or clearly on the impact of what they saw as a simile. Others chose the example of the toffee removing fillings instantly and inferred that this meant the sweets were sticky and chewy, but failed to link their comment to any specific choice of word or phrase. Yet others chose the 'chisel' image and interpreted this as evidence of the danger of the sweets rather than commenting on why the chisel – hard, metal, tough, violent, linked to DIY – would be used to describe the removal of a sweet.

Students are reminded of the need to focus first and foremost on the effects of words and phrases, and to avoid generalised comments such as the effect being to 'show what the sweets are like'.

Question 4

The task in Question 4 is to compare the writers' attitudes to sweets, allowing students to consider the text extracts as a whole. The task requires students to engage with each writer's individual points of view and the methods they have used to convey their perspectives, as well as to compare the differences and similarities between the writers' points of view across the two extracts.

Some students found this task challenging. In Source A, the writer is nostalgic and enthusiastic about the sweets of his youth, but some students were confused by the apparent negative imagery offered by the writer in his description of the sweets as weapons or torture. Similarly, in Source B, there is the writer's stated concern for the poisonous nature of sweets and the villainous manufacturers who appealed to children with bright coloured sweets only to kill them, and his equally clearly stated view that sugared sweets are nourishing and warming. Not all students were able to grasp and explain these apparently ambivalent perspectives in their responses to Question 4.

The task is a complex one, and without careful and prolonged preparation for the exam, many students found it difficult to combine the different skills assessed in this task: understanding of ideas, comment on methods and comparison of perspectives. The mean mark again for this question was lower than in previous series at 4.5 marks. Again, this is just into Level 2, suggesting that performance on these reading questions is very consistent.

Common strengths in responses

Students in Level 3 were able to clearly identify Source A's humour and the exaggeration the writer uses to achieve this. They used a range of relevant quotations to support their comments, and were able to compare these to the writer in Source B's serious tone, which focused more on the science and economics of sweet manufacture. Other successful comparisons were made between the writers' attitudes to the value of sweets, with Source A demonstrating how the children celebrated with a wasteful abundance of confectionery, even as the girls in the sweet factory were forced to depend on sweets as their only sustenance.

The very best responses in Level 4 were few and far between but were more detailed and perceptive in their understanding. Some chose to comment on the packaging of the sweets, for example, noting that there was in fact a similarity between the alluring sweet packets in both texts, and how this illustrated the importance of marketing across the different centuries and the need to be unique or especially eye-catching to appeal to their young consumers. Others focused on the morality of sweets, and explored the ethical concerns relating to the exploitation of young workers, and the villainous manufacturers with their poisoned candies in Source B, comparing this to the idyllic childhood of irresponsible pleasure-seeking depicted in Source A.

Common misunderstandings

Weaker responses tended to show some understanding of the two perspectives, but lacked the clarity of explanation to secure a Level 3 mark. Their comparisons were more likely to be mismatched, comparing one aspect of one source with a different aspect of the other, such as the dangers of the Victorian sweets compared to the cheapness of the sweets in Source A. It was reassuring that so many students included reference to methods, but these need to be explored in more detail and linked to the perspectives in order to be rewarded with marks in Level 3.

Question 5

The task in Question 5 was based on the exploitation of textile workers who are employed in the fashion industry, creating a thematic link to the experience of the girls in Source B. This provided some students with ideas and material to draw on in their writing responses.

The question, as usual, contained a number of strands to allow students to focus on an area where they feel most comfortable. Indeed, the range of responses was very diverse and students adopted a whole range of approaches to the statement. Some took a moral view that our dependence on fast fashion was inadvertently causing economic harm to those employed to manufacture our clothes. Others were more circumspect, suggesting that it wasn't we who were responsible. In fact, they argued, it was only as a result of the western markets for fashion that these young people were employed at all. Yet others adopted a stance where they took factory owners and governments to task for the poor working conditions and limited pay.

Most students were able to engage with the ideas and present at least some successful argument, with the mean mark for AO5 in the middle of Level 2. This level of performance indicates that the cohort as a whole were performing less well in response to the Reading section, and performed relatively better in the Writing section. The mean marks for Technical Accuracy (AO6) were also mid-Level 2, which reflected the performance on Paper 1 as well, suggesting a very consistent pattern of achievement.

Common strengths

The best responses were those where the student presented a coherent response to the statement which took one perspective and followed it through to the end. There was less evidence of students flip flopping back and forth, agreeing and disagreeing with different aspects of the statement, which often results in an unclear argument. It was gratifying to read so many engaged and impassioned responses, with students adopting an appropriate tone and style to match the audience and purpose of the task. They had sufficient experience of buying or consuming fashion to develop a meaningful point of view.

The highest performing students were able to take a conceptualised approach and set the issue of fast fashion within a moral, economic, social, technological or environmental context. This lens allowed them to develop their perspective on the theme of fashion and the exploitation of workers, to provide more detailed and thoughtful responses which were more likely to convince or even compel. Technically, they used a wide variety of punctuation to support more complex grammatical structures and to shape sentences created specifically for effect. Technical skills were deployed deliberately to create effects and enhance the content of their arguments.

Common misunderstandings

There were weaker responses which failed to meet the criteria for Level 2, often characterised by their brevity. These responses tended to be very simple in their approach and offered a limited variety of ideas. They tended to be less formal in style and register and lacked any structural features to organise and develop their ideas.

Weaker responses also demonstrated a lack of variety in the sentence structures attempted, and a subsequent absence of a range of punctuation. Lack of control of agreement was frequently evident in these responses as students struggled to maintain secure syntax. There was, as ever, a range of spelling accuracy.

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

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