

GCSE English Language

8700/1

Report on the exam

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

This is an unusual series being the first full summer series since the COVID-19 pandemic. Candidates showed impressive focus and effort to succeed, clearly determined to tackle external exams to the best of their ability.

Areas where students excelled

The extract from 'The Pearl' by John Steinbeck engaged students and many seemed to focus quickly on the danger posed by the scorpion. Examiners reported that Question 4 showed real engagement, both with the statement and with a discursive essay. Students were able to comment on Kino's 'unhelpful[ness]' using a range of evidence from the text. There were many comments on the juxtaposition of Kino to Juana, his wife, with many candidates praising Juana's 'intelligent' action. Reading of the extract was often thorough with examiners noting that there were more subtle details within more successful answers, such as Kino's perspective on Juana – his usually 'patient' and 'fragile' wife.

In Question 5, the narrative option 'Write about a life-saving rescue' prompted many engaging responses from near drownings, rescue from fire and the desert rescue of an ill-prepared tourist. More successful candidates wrote with control over the pace of their answers and with tighter focus on fewer events. There was more evidence of candidates planning their responses and this seems to have provided them with more authorial control.

Areas where students struggled

Examiners reported that there were many responses for Question 2 that were content-focused only. Linguistic focus on individual words and short phrases is demanded by this question, and candidates who write about unfocused lengthy quotations are unable to analyse the language.

The descriptive option for Question 5 prompted many students to use contrived vocabulary. This vocabulary becomes cumbersome and does not support students in creating an atmosphere or a cohesive description. Students could be advised to avoid complex vocabulary and instead focus on vocabulary that is more subtle.

Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
<p>AO1</p> <p>Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas.</p> <p>Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.</p>	<p>Copying sections from the text which do not make sense alone or in relation to the focus of the question.</p> <p>Selecting information from outside of the given lines.</p> <p>Including inferential points which therefore stray from the focus of the question.</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>Using long and unfocused quotations which lead students to write about content not language analysis.</p> <p>Focusing on the contrast, the juxtaposition of characters Kino and Juana that could not be supported by language analysis.</p> <p>Writing about language features for Question 3, rather than structural features.</p> <p>Failing to use structural terminology when recounting the events across the extract.</p>
<p>AO4 - Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.</p>	<p>Mistaking Kino for Juana when writing about their actions.</p> <p>Writing outside the given lines for their whole response.</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>Using contrived vocabulary: 'lackadaisical', 'plethora', 'discombobulated'.</p> <p>Describing details but without any structural link between them.</p> <p>Writing with an accelerated pace to events, where for example, danger, rescue, recovery and return home are all included so can only be included on a superficial level.</p> <p>Lengthy sections of direct speech which become less successful.</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>It was felt that there has been a significant decline in clear, legible handwriting.</p> <p>Punctuation errors: erroneous capital letters, incorrect semi-colons and incomplete direct speech punctuation</p>

Short answer questions

Question 1

Students had two things to focus on in the question this year: the brush house and what is happening. This provided students with many opportunities to gain four marks. 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 brush house, but when copying from the text, needed to be sure their answers included an accurate subject.

Common misunderstandings

Some students wrote that the 'crevices' were actually a suggestion that the house was 'broken', as well as that the 'long streaks' were not sunlight, but something more concrete such as wood splinters. Students who copy incomplete sections should check that there is accuracy in the detail and that the section chosen makes sense.

Some students read 'scorpion' as a creature that is significantly bigger and more mammal-like. Examiners reported that students misread 'Coyotito' as 'coyote' which lead to some clear misunderstanding. The 'hanging bed box' lead to some misunderstanding from 'hanging' as a form of capital punishment or how the baby was 'hanging' from the ropes.

Question 2

Question two focused on the conflict between Kino and the scorpion. Many students commented on a range of features that were identified correctly. Successful answers read the extract as a 'stand-off' where both Kino and the scorpion were matched in stealth and movement. Some students were able to analyse the language, especially the 'song of the enemy', as a dangerous dance, where Kino and the scorpion were matching one another step by step. For many, the second half of the passage offered more accessible linguistic features, with adverbs such as 'noiselessly' and verbs such as 'gliding' and 'jerk'. There were features that appealed to students across the ability range; 'curved thorn on the tail' was accessible to many and 'the song of Evil, the music of the enemy' was at least attempted by a wide range of students.

Common misunderstandings

Students were able to write about the conflict but did not always link these ideas to specific linguistic items. Some students wrote as though the scorpion had in some way decided to attack the house. Some students found the 'whistling' of Kino's nose to indicate an attempt to train the scorpion, an indication of Kino's relaxation or linked it to the metaphor of the 'song of the family'. The phrase 'song of evil' was correctly identified as a metaphor but then interpreted as literal music to which Kino and the scorpion were listening. Students who read to the end of the passage seemed to be able to select language features or items with which they were more secure. Many students seemed to focus quickly on 'the song of Evil, the music of the enemy', as an earlier feature, but found this very challenging, when perhaps they would have been more successful choosing other linguistic aspects in the latter half of the passage. Examiners reported that students

wanted to make use of alliteration and personification when these were not easily or accurately applied to the passage.

Question 3

The passage had a linear structure, but several shifts in focus – from Kino to the scorpion and a significant shift when the baby shook the rope. Many students were able to recount the main events in the extract and were able to identify the uncertain aspect of the ending. Some students were able to note the shift in perspective, as Kino watches his wife Juana with wonder, and saw that this indicated a shift in the atmosphere that led to her determination at the end. Some students made insightful links between the beginning and the ending, referring to the change in the sunlight and linking this to the increasing danger that Coyotito was in. Some successful answers were able to link small details across the text such as the baby ‘screaming’ and then later ‘moaning’, the focus on the parents and the baby extending then to the neighbours who crowded the doorway, increasing the concern and anticipation of a fatality.

Common misunderstandings

Examiners reported that many students tended to restrict their comments to just the beginning, middle and end, without much comment on the effects of any other section. There were fewer responses where students discussed the internal shifts and why the writer chose to change perspective or focus. It was felt that the level of comment on this question was weaker, although the passage itself seemed to be very accessible when discussing structural features. Less successful answers continue to use simple comments such as ‘makes the reader want to read on’ or ‘makes me interested’.

Extended response questions

Question 4

Students engaged with the statement, ‘Juana’s reaction to the danger facing their baby is different to Kino’s. The writer shows that Kino is unhelpful and it is Juana who tries to save the baby’s life.’ Examiners reported that students across the ability range were able to present their views on either or both of the parents, and therefore there were fewer level 1 responses. Students were able to discuss how Kino was both helpful and unhelpful. This meant that there was an increase in balanced answers where students were able to agree and disagree. Helpfully, many students kept the differing sides of their argument separate which meant that their answers were more coherent.

Some students read ‘unhelpful’ as ‘useless’ and there were many emotive answers which stated that Kino was foolish to continue attacking something that was already dead, or indeed that he should have been more effective at catching the scorpion or mending the crevices in the house.

Students also engaged with Juana and particularly with the simile of ‘eyes like a lioness’. Successful answers were able to argue that Juana was protective and intensely maternal in her actions to save her baby, linking this to the simile, but also to challenge Kino’s reaction as needlessly violent. There were many thorough responses, with students choosing textual references from across the text and reaching the ending. This supported some students in writing with a sense of structure as well as finding more of the subtle details. Some successful answers explored the themes in the passage such as determination, resilience, single mindedness, maternal instinct and duty. Students tended to make use of writer’s methods in their responses, but

all students could be reminded that discussing language and/or structure gains credit in this answer.

Common misunderstandings

As has been seen in previous series, students were sometimes engaged with contextual aspects that led them away from the passage. In this series, some students engaged with the gender roles of the parents and, although Kino comments on his wife being 'patient' and 'fragile', discussion that leaves the details of the passage behind struggles to be successful. There was some misreading of the passage where the characters were mixed up and their actions were misinterpreted. Juana's attempts to extract the poison from the baby were misread as cruel and Kino, instead of 'hovering', was 'hoovering'. With Kino 'hovering' at the end of the passage, some students were damning of Kino and saw that here he had 'no clue' and even that he did not care at all. As with other questions, students might be reminded to think of the detail within the context of the whole passage rather than details as separate and in isolation from the rest.

Question 5

Descriptive option: Describe an unusual place to stay.

This response used the prompt of an image showing a Mexican round house. Of the two options for section B, this appeared to be the less popular choice, although examiners noted a great deal of effort in both planning and answering across both the descriptive and narrative options.

Strongest responses

The strongest answers included an imagined atmosphere in the house and/or used a structural shift to present different time periods, different seasons or the house in a very clear setting such as one discovered in the middle of a jungle or as part of an archaeological ruin. Some students remembered that the image is a prompt and that they were able to imagine another unusual place to stay. There were some engaging answers set in a lighthouse, a jungle tree-top house and a water-logged cave. Students who were able to bring some of their own imagination to the image gave themselves more opportunities to shape the description and to add descriptive details in which they (and so the reader) were more interested. More successful answers explored the smaller details, such as the contents of the house as an indication of who (once) lived there, as an imprint of past lives. Language features and vocabulary were chosen with care and added to the description rather than being contrived and breaking the fluency of the description. The structure of more successful answers tended to be considered and planned rather than accidental and, often, haphazard.

Weakest responses

Weaker responses tended to stay within the details of the image, and students might be reminded that the image is a prompt; they are able to add their own ideas and, indeed, to describe an unusual place to stay that is not a Mexican round house but somewhere else. These answers found it more challenging to be successful as they listed items that they could see within the image and found it difficult to add or to change the atmosphere or details of interest. Contrived vocabulary was a burden to many of the less successful answers, where students repeatedly used 'plethora,' 'lackadaisical' and 'discombobulated' – amongst others – with little success. There were also many

reports from the panel of easily recognisable phrases that have been borrowed and copied from other sources.

Narrative option: Write a story about a life-saving rescue

This option seemed to be the most popular choice, with many students opting for stories that showed a wide range of heroism. There were some really enjoyable responses drawing on historical events such as WW1 and WW2, mythical rescues from the Minotaur or malevolent gods, sinking ships, shark attack and rescue from mental health issues. Students again wrote with increased planning beforehand and with real commitment to their answers; examiners reported that the responses for question 5 in this series seemed to considerably fuller than in previous series.

Strongest responses

The more successful responses controlled the pace and the plot of their rescue story. Responses that start in the action, without the preamble of getting up, having breakfast and so on, engaged the reader much more quickly. There were responses that showed careful attention to how tension might be conveyed through the weather, through deteriorating conditions or equipment or, indeed, through the increasing emotions of the characters. There was a, sometimes remarkable, sensitivity to human emotions in some of the responses.

The more successful responses had a sense that the rescue might not be complete within the time allowed in the exam or that the rescue might not be wholly successful. Where the rescue was completed within the time, more successful answers controlled the ending so that the characters might have paused on their narrow good fortune, the efforts of their rescuer, or simply on the position that they found themselves in.

Weakest responses

Students who wrote less successful answers tended to lose control of the narrative's pace and detail. There were some good ideas that were written superficially so that it was difficult for the reader to engage with the narrative. The endings of rescues, in these answers, tended to be simplistic: a very speedy rescue, recovery and return to bed. Students might be advised to end their narrative earlier so that they might start and end in the action. Students tended, as in previous series, to include murders or large scale tragedies, such as tsunamis, which are very difficult to write about, particularly when there is such a limited time available. Although tragedy may be implied as a possible outcome to this narrative option, students could be advised to focus on a small aspect of a larger event in order to gain more control of the narrative.

There were answers that, again, were hampered by contrived vocabulary or imagery. Students might be advised not to use over complicated vocabulary as it is rarely successful. Although it can be successful to 'show – not to tell' events and emotions, some students lose the clarity of events entirely and the examiner has to work hard, sometimes unsuccessfully, to determine what is happening within the narrative. Although an independent imagination and extended metaphor can be successful, as with vocabulary choice, it is important that these do not become opaque.

Further support

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