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FOREWORD

This booklet contains reports written by Examiners on the work of candidates in certain papers. **Its contents are primarily for the information of the subject teachers concerned.**

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCE Ordinary Level

Paper 1123/01

Composition

General comments

Most candidates for this component of the syllabus demonstrated a pleasing ability to respond to this Paper in a thoughtful, imaginative and substantial way. They had obviously been well prepared in the basic skills of essay writing and approached the examination with some enthusiasm, capturing the interest of the reader and showing genuine engagement with the task. As Teachers and candidates have become more familiar with the format of this Paper, their confidence and understanding of the opportunity it offers to demonstrate their linguistic skills have developed. Examiners commented again on the improved level of general communication achieved, particularly by the weaker candidates. There were few very poor scripts seen and an improvement in the accuracy of basic spelling, punctuation and control of sentence structures meant that meaning was rarely in doubt even in the weakest scripts.

The range of topics offered on this Paper afforded plenty of opportunity for candidates to draw on their own experiences and whilst the personal narrative of **Question 3** proved to be easily the most popular choice, there was no topic that was obviously regarded as too difficult or inaccessible and attracted noticeably few responses. It was particularly pleasing to note that there were fewer obviously prepared essays this year and even the prepared 'opening paragraph' describing weather conditions or scenery, that bore little relevance to what followed, was rarely seen. Many candidates developed their essays at some length, sustaining a fair level of accurate writing and relevant content, although some candidates wrote at too great a length, allowing their essays to become rambling and tedious and often losing the linguistic accuracy of the more careful early work. Lengthy compositions in **Part 1**, sometimes resulted in short, hurried or unfinished responses in **Part 2**, forfeiting marks that would have been gained with better planning and use of the time available. Whilst few rubric offences were reported, there was a small number of candidates who wrote short or unfinished responses to **Part 2** and several who chose to tackle the **Part 2** exercise first and found themselves unable to write more than 200 words for **Part 1**. Candidates must realise that these very short answers incur a penalty which can so easily be avoided by sensible division of the time available between the two sections of the Paper, as they are clearly reminded on the Question Paper itself. As always, some candidates struggled with verb forms and tense sequences, idioms and sentence structures, pronouns and prepositions, punctuation and paragraphing, which remain the aspects of English that appear to present most difficulty to candidates in this examination. Linguistic inaccuracy and sometimes poor planning prevented candidates from achieving the high marks that their ideas and ambition warranted. A mnemonic quoted by one candidate: '**Proper Preparation Prevents Poor Performance**' might well be taken to heart by all candidates for this examination as well as the athletes for whom it was originally suggested!

Some worrying trends were so frequently seen across the whole range of Centres as to merit a special mention: the failure to separate sentences or to use the comma-splice, which remains probably the most obvious bar to clarity of communication in these scripts; lack of variety in sentence structures, with the tendency to use short, simple sentences throughout or to write involved, overlong sentences with excessive use of coordinates; the failure to indicate or paragraph direct speech or, equally confusing for the reader, the tendency to preface the spoken words with 'that', and, finally, the growing use of the ampersand and of e-mail/text message symbols, despite warnings in previous Reports that these abbreviations are unacceptable. Whilst candidates in most Centres produced neatly presented scripts in clear, precise handwriting, in some regions presentation was untidy and crossing out was frequent, as was the use of correction fluid which often obliterated words on the other side of the page, thus penalising the candidate. Some handwriting was scrawled and extremely difficult to read, which was not helpful to Examiners.

Comments on specific questions**Part 1****Question 1**

Write about an unexpected partnership that proved to be a success.

This was a fairly popular choice as it was an open-ended question which allowed candidates to be quite imaginative in their responses. It brought out some interesting scenarios ranging from school-based experiences of unlikely pairings in sport, projects or competition entries, to more speculative adult success stories in business ventures or marriage. Sometimes the 'unexpected' nature of the partnership was not highlighted or particularly unusual. Some were clearly personal in response while others were obviously fictional. Characterisation was occasionally developed in an interesting way; in other scripts the sequence of events was charted as the main focus. This topic was generally chosen by the better candidates; in the weaker scripts insufficient attention was given to the 'success' of the partnership. Examiners noted that in this topic, as in **Question 2** and **Question 5**, a significant number of candidates had invented a similar scenario to that of **Part 2** and 'borrowed' the useful outline plan provided by the bullet points to structure their essays for **Part 1**. This produced unlikely partners representing the school in sporting or public-speaking competitions with successful outcomes. This had not been foreseen when the Question Paper was set but it certainly helped weaker candidates to plan their essays more effectively!

Question 2

Write a story based on the sentence 'As soon as I heard the news of the special offer, I knew what I must do.'

This was quite a popular question, although perhaps less so than usual for the narrative option on the Paper. The offers described were many and varied but usually involved supermarket sales, job or interview offers, opportunities for scholarships overseas, bargains in fashion and computer goods or holiday offers. For the candidates who sought to use the pattern of **Part 2** the 'special offer' was to represent the school in a competition.....! It was interesting to note how many candidates actually wrote out and highlighted the title sentence in their work. The offer appeared at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the story, suggesting some thoughtful planning of the narrative before the essay was begun. It was pleasing to see that very few candidates succumbed to the temptation to re-work an obviously prepared story in response to this title.

Question 3

The day your neighbour asked you to look after her young baby while she went into town.

This proved to be by far and away the most popular topic on the Paper. Personal experience gave rise to sensitive, knowledgeable and frequently humorous accounts, often with a 'moral' at the end of the story, as what had seemed easy was followed by the disillusion of sordid reality. The routine of a baby's day gave an obvious structure to the stories but equally reduced many to a predictable and rather tedious list-type account of the passing hours. This was by no means true of all, however. There were some thoughtful, dramatic and amusing accounts of the trials and tribulations of trying to cope with 'young babies' whose ages might range from a few months to even ten years old! Many of the baby-sitters were, they claimed, inexperienced and some lacked the appropriate vocabulary. Examiners were afforded an insight into the many different cultures of the candidates for this international examination, including the local terms for nappies/pampers/diapers or even 'dippers' – and graphic descriptions of changing them! In some areas a bottle of tea, rather than milk, holds the secret of how to stop the crying. Whether the babies behaved like angels or 'escaped' and hid, broke the valuables, were kidnapped, drowned, injured and hospitalised whilst the sitter chatted on the phone or watched TV, the experience was reported to the parent as being 'a pleasure. He was no trouble at all!' Whatever the approach adopted, the real enjoyment that the candidates found in writing on this topic came across strongly and some of the best work was seen here.

This topic also gave rise to some specific linguistic problems:- confusion of gender: 'She and his husband went off'; 'He had coloured eyes just like her mother'; idiom: 'I took him up in my hands' for 'picked him up in my arms'; 'She asked me to look for her baby' for 'look after her baby'; 'I went to look after his bottle' for 'prepare his bottle' and word order: 'She kindly asked me to look after her baby' for 'She asked me to kindly look after her baby' – (although the sitter sometimes welcomed the experience, that was not the meaning intended!). The most frequent error was the failure to punctuate and paragraph direct speech correctly causing confusion in the conversation between the mother and the babysitter.

Question 4

How far do you think young people are influenced by what they see on television and in films?

This was the second most popular topic, which was unexpected since the discursive topics are usually less popular than narratives in this part of the Paper. The subject clearly appealed to a lot of candidates as they saw it as an opportunity to express their views based on personal experience, although its complexity was underestimated by some. In most cases both sides of the argument were put and familiar points were raised, i.e. the dangerous influence of scenes of violence, sexually explicit material, extremes of fashion and the glamourising of drugs and alcohol, and the more positive contribution to education and entertainment. Many had strong opinions which improved the overall quality of this usually problematic genre, but weaker candidates had trouble in controlling structures, tenses and mood: 'They copy the actors and this would lead to...'. The significance of 'How far...' in the question was seldom noticed, even by the best candidates and most essays became a catalogue of the ways, good or bad, in which the young are influenced by the media. Again, this topic gave rise to some specific problems of language, notably whether 'the media' should be singular or plural (both being frequently seen in current parlance, either was accepted if consistent), the frequent repetition of the phrase 'television and films' (often confusing or ignoring the different prepositions involved) and the universal but inexplicable misspelling 'flims'. Nevertheless, there were many thoughtful, balanced arguments presented in what Examiners noted as one of the most successful discursive topics of recent years.

Question 5

What do you consider to be your greatest achievement? Why does it mean so much to you?

This was a fairly popular choice as, again, it was sufficiently wide in interpretation to allow for a range of achievements from success in examinations, sport, music and art to the more abstract achievements of spreading the word of God, resisting temptation, gaining trust, bringing up children and saving lives. It was often the choice of more mature candidates with a wider range of experiences to choose from, who wrote emotionally from the heart. However, in many scripts the candidates' aspirations or ambitions for the future were the subject of the essays, detailing what they hoped to achieve rather than success already gained. This mis-interpretation led to linguistic problems with confusion of tense and verb forms. Imaginative writers pretended that they had achieved their ambition and were writing in retrospect about how they had arrived at their goal – which for several was to win a competition in which they represented the school.....! The second part of the title was frequently missed by careless readers or ignored by those running out of time or ideas.

Part 2

The directed writing task in this part of the Paper aims to assess different skills from those tested in the continuous free writing of **Part 1**. Here the rubric suggests an audience to address, a purpose to be served and some specific information to be conveyed. As well as carrying out the instructions clearly and accurately in the required format, candidates are expected to adopt a style and tone appropriate to the task.

These aims were seldom fully accomplished by the candidates this year. Failure to read the question with sufficient care and to construct the event described clearly in their own minds before beginning to write, led to many candidates missing some of the required content points. Many candidates failed to register that the first and last items to be included in the account had two elements: where and when; friends and family; failure to include both elements meant that the point was not awarded. Some candidates failed to notice that it was the writer's feelings when the result was announced, not during the performance, that was specified and again forfeited an easy mark through careless reading. There was evidence in many scripts of genuine attempts to amplify the content points in interesting ways. The question gave candidates free choice as to the precise nature of the competition and, as was expected, there was a wide range of activities described—debates, sports matches, chess, quizzes, poetry recitations, drama competitions, spelling bees etc.

Some candidates became so enthusiastic in their detailed descriptions of the events that they wrote far too much and lost time that could have been more usefully spent checking for errors and omissions in their scripts. Those who wrote concisely, highlighting the precise details and heeding the requirement to interest the readers, produced the best work. Although a structure for the piece was clearly suggested by the bullet points, many candidates failed to paragraph the account. The style and format of an entry for the school magazine was seldom consciously attempted and many wrote in letter format, although in some cases the letter was addressed to the magazine editor and a suitable tone was adopted. It was disappointing to see so many errors in the spelling of 'competition' and 'announced' although both are given on the Question Paper. Other frequently noted errors were 'congragulated me'; 'price' for 'prize'; 'goal medle' for 'gold medal'; 'ensured' for 'assured' ('I ensured him that I would do my best'); 'represent' for 'present' ('We had to represent a model to the judges'). Nevertheless, this proved to be a successful question in that it was accessible to candidates across the ability range and from all the areas that sit this examination.

Guidance for Teachers preparing candidates for future examinations

There was, as always, much evidence of careful teaching and practice to be found in the scripts from all Centres. The more sensible choice of topic; evidence of writing from personal experience; fewer obviously 'prepared' essays – all these factors were evidence that some of the advice given in previous Reports had been heeded, although many of the grammatical faults mentioned above continue to be seen year after year. Spelling was generally more accurate, even in the work of weaker candidates. There was some improvement in the use of punctuation and paragraphing to organise the text for the reader. However, sentence separation faults and the use of the comma splice still mar the coherence of many scripts and the failure to indicate, punctuate and paragraph direct speech adds to the confusion. Examiners found it necessary to re-read such scripts to establish communication.

Candidates should be reminded that ordinariness is interesting and genuine incidents from everyday life need not be mundane, while the urge to include melodrama may simply stretch the credulity of the reader and detract from the impact and interest of the narrative.

Again, advice should be given on the wise use of the limited time available in the examination. Very short answers in either section incur a penalty. Practice in writing timed essays in preparation for the examination should give candidates the confidence to tackle the two sections in the order and within the time limits recommended on the Question Paper and thus to avoid serious lack of balance in essay length.

There was some evidence this year that Teachers are suggesting lists of 'high tariff vocabulary' that might be included in essays to impress Examiners. Whilst this practice may be beneficial if candidates are thoroughly familiar with the meaning and use of such words, it can only be detrimental if vocabulary is used inappropriately in terms of meaning or register and thus becomes obtrusive or distorts the meaning for the reader. Some words noticed in this context were 'aghast'; 'unnerved'; 'overwhelmed'; 'elated'.

Confusion of word order has become more noticeable this time, particularly in some regions. Examples such as 'Everyone gave their performance slowly and it was next my turn'; 'Television is a simply electronic device'; 'Not a single stuff like this in my house should be found' or 'He went to his office back' are not only un-English but positively distort the intended meaning. Teachers should give careful attention to patterns of English sentence structure, particularly where they differ greatly from those of the candidates' first language. It is also very important that candidates hear and read as much contemporary English as possible to keep abreast of current idiom and eliminate archaisms and cliché from their work.

The importance of planning and developing ideas logically cannot be over-stated nor can the need to check work carefully and make sure that time is allowed to do this, as so many slips and omissions can be found and corrected by the candidates themselves.

As mentioned earlier in this Report, Teachers must act now to eliminate the use of the ampersand and text-messaging abbreviations, which have no place in written English – certainly not in an examination context!

The generally accepted presentation and register of a report, a newspaper article, a speech, an eye-witness account etc. should be explained to candidates and practised in preparing for the examination, so that there is no confusion if such formats are required in the directed writing task of **Part 2**.

Final comment

This Paper enabled candidates to meet the assessment objectives of the Syllabus and achieved effective differentiation across a pleasing range of achievement. Examiners commented on how much they enjoyed and appreciated the interesting material and the high standard of so much of the work of the candidates in this examination.

Paper 1123/02 Comprehension

General comments

Reports from Team Leaders and Assistant Examiners agreed that candidates had, on the whole, responded with some enthusiasm to this year's Paper; and responses overall suggested that it compared well with those set in previous years. **Questions 1, 2, 4 (a), 5 and 7 (a)** were particularly successful, perhaps because they needed straightforward answers which did not make demands on the candidates' powers of expression. The best scripts were impressive in their command of sophisticated grammatical forms, wide vocabulary and accurate spelling and punctuation: while the weaker ones showed the usual linguistic errors. These included wrong verb forms and tense errors, distorted syntax, omission or obvious misuse of prepositions, serious errors of agreement (a singular subject and plural verb, or vice versa), and ingrained weaknesses of punctuation: i.e. the habitual comma replacing the necessary full stop. However, the general standard of response to the Paper was better than it had been in previous years. The possible reasons for this will be discussed below in the comments on specific questions.

Comments on specific questions**Question 1**

The correct answer, '(en)circled' or 'surrounded' was often given here, although 'covered' was sometimes offered, and occasionally candidates became embroiled with the wrecked ship. An interesting mistake, where candidates who offered it were trying to explain the evident metaphor, was the answer which connected 'ringed' with sound: 'The whole island ringed with a noise like bell'.

Question 2

Most candidates gave the correct answer here: 'emergency signal'. Those who failed to score either omitted the idea of an emergency, or contented themselves with the 'metallic clink! clink! clink!' sounds made by Angelo.

Question 3

This was a more testing question, and better candidates did appreciate the effect of the comparison with a curtain spreading darkness across the sky, or shutting out light. Others failed to see the point of the image, and wrote about the cloud(s) becoming dark, or looked to other parts of paragraph 3, hence emphasising the speed of the cloud or its height.

Question 4

- (a) Most candidates achieved the correct answer here: 'shriek'.
- (b) This question proved difficult for the vast majority of candidates, and very few scored the 3 possible marks. It was rare for them to frame their answers in abstract terms, and most examined the phrase in terms of its specific context. Often this still enabled them to gain the mark for 'frailty' and sometimes for 'sense', but they were very seldom able to find an acceptable synonym for 'human'.

Question 5

This question was well answered for the most part, with candidates focusing correctly on 'new' and 'expensive'. A few candidates did not understand the term 'outboard motors' so thought that the men were carrying boats on their shoulders. Other ingenious answers suggested that the 'heavy burdens' would act as ballast and prevent them from being blown away by the storm.

Question 6

This was a useful discriminator between candidates who read the question and the prescribed portion of the text carefully and those who did not. The causes of 'discomfort' were the stinging sand blowing in their faces and the difficulty of keeping their balance in the sand and the wind. Weaker, less-attentive, candidates moved on in the paragraph to the 'dangers' presented by the branches of the palm trees and the flying coconuts.

Question 7

- (a) The two correct words were 'wearily' and 'exhausted'. Some candidates offered 'small' and 'fragile', having, apparently, not noticed that these adjectives applied to Gerry.
- (b) Despite the question's attempt to avoid 'speed' as an answer, some candidates still favoured it. Others misunderstood the use of the word 'fearful', and interpreted the executioner as being in some doubt or fear about his office. Many answers (some making an exhaustive use of physics) tended to describe the fall of the tree rather than understanding the passage's implications of death.

Question 8

What had been designed as a simple question caused a large number of candidates a surprising amount of trouble. Some answers simply paraphrased 'to dodge the next threat', an answer which was unacceptable because it was part of the question. Others did not understand 'upturned' and simply thought that the author was running backwards to avoid seeing the horrors which might await him.

Question 9

- (a) A failure to understand 'resented' proved a stumbling block for some candidates, and very few realised that an explanation of 'unprovoked assault' was what the question required. Many, however, gained one mark for 'assault', either by glossing it as 'attack' or, more often, describing the event when the author pulled Gerry with him as he tumbled down the hill. A handful of answers confused this with the earlier 'tripping' episode.
- (b) Most candidates gained one mark here for the characters' earlier sufferings, 'all that we had been through'. Few were able to point out that the author's laughter under these circumstances was 'inappropriate', but were happy simply to repeat the question's comment on the author's laughter, not making the deductive leap that there was 'nothing to laugh about'.

Question 10

Although the vast majority of candidates correctly identified the image used by the author to gain sympathy for himself and his friends, too many forfeited the mark by not understanding the idea of a phrase. This meant that they offered the final sentence in its entirety.

Question 11

Candidates found this vocabulary question more difficult than it had been in previous years. Very few gained 5 or even 4 marks. 'Dense' and 'screen' were the only words paraphrased with consistent accuracy. 'Crafty' was often glossed as 'skilful' or 'professional': the football reference must have had a bearing here. 'Used' rather than 'used up' was often given as a synonym for 'spent'; 'gave way' was incorrectly read as 'gave away', and 'withstand' and 'scanty' were almost never accurately translated. Candidates should be encouraged to go back to the set passage and look at their chosen words in context. Other reasons for failure to score were insufficient attention to the rubric: giving more than one alternative to the word to be glossed; or using the designated word in a sentence of the candidate's own invention. It is understood that this is an excellent way to familiarise candidates with the contextual meanings of English vocabulary, but it is not appropriate where this question is concerned.

Question 12

Although a few candidates indulged in flights of fancy, seeing this question as an invitation to some form of creative writing, the majority wrote a summary in the manner required. Examiners reported that there were fewer under-length or over-length answers in their apportionments, and that the word limit had been more strictly observed. There were many commendable attempts at own words. Brunei Centres were still inclined to use the technique of strategic selection and linking of lifted phrases and sentences. Skilfully applied, this often produced better content scores than answers where candidates condensed their ideas too much. There was some confusion between flying branches and flying trees, between coconuts simply dropping or being hurled through the air, and the author's exact strategy when tripping Gerry to save him from the uprooted tree, or why he was thrown down the hill. On the whole, however, the majority of answers showed a good understanding of the original passage.