

English as Second Language Studies

2010 ASSESSMENT REPORT

English Learning Area

ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE STUDIES

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GENERAL COMMENTS

There were approximately 2600 students enrolled in English as Second Language Studies in 2010. The examination enabled students to demonstrate the skills they had acquired during the year. While there were some excellent responses to the listening comprehension and the written paper, markers commented on the fact that a small number of students found it difficult to cope with the demands of the examination. These students had a limited command of the vocabulary, grammar, and structures needed to address the questions adequately.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 4: EXAMINATION

Section 1: Listening Comprehension

Part A

In this section students were required to demonstrate an understanding of the text and respond in either complete sentences or a few words. Students seemed more confident with this section and showed they could answer questions when there was a 'cue' in the text indicating that the answer would follow; that is, when there was a direct link between the question and the text. For example, the description of the forms of academic misconduct, and the penalties for misconduct, were generally well done. Most students managed to complete the flow chart and were able to use appropriate language for this task.

When listening, students should use all available sources and be aware of the context to assist them in understanding what is being said. For example, students who had trouble identifying the role of the speaker could have seen 'Academic Conduct Committee' written three times in the flow chart.

Students are encouraged to work on spelling skills – generally markers are flexible with interpreting the words students write, but many simple words were spelled incorrectly and may have caused marks to be lost. Writing concise answers, with relevant supporting details, is essential to achieve maximum marks.

Part B

Information for the various questions in part B is usually found throughout the text and students are encouraged to work on synthesising and organising notes. Extracting relevant information when answering questions is a vital skill.

While many students showed understanding of the text by analysing and organising material into one or more well-structured paragraphs with topic sentences, others had difficulty. If a question is worth 8 marks and a whole page is provided for the answer, the expectation is that the response will be written in more than one paragraph. It is also expected that each paragraph will have a topic sentence, and the information will be grouped appropriately. Starting a new line without paying attention to the logic of the paragraphing is not appropriate.

Question 6 was generally not answered well – students were able to provide information about study skills, but not often about a balanced life. Even when information was explicitly linked to the question, students tended to select only the first reference. Information relating to the question on the results of the ‘survey of successful students’ was included at the beginning and the end of the text. Most students did not mention the second reference. More successful responses interpreted the information and were able to write concisely, with all the relevant information contained in well-structured paragraphs.

For Question 7 some students appeared not to have sufficiently considered what the question required. For example, students wrote about study habits in a well-balanced life, which is information more appropriate to Question 6. It is important to note that when the link between the question and the text is less clear, students need to interpret the information from the whole of the text which was read out, in order to address the question. As a result, many students had difficulty with the questions about a well-balanced life, and about personal study habits. In other instances, even though students had all the right points, they did not use them for the appropriate question.

It is important that students write concisely and present all the ideas that are expected rather than use ‘etc.’. Listening comprehension means comprehending the text and writing all that is expected in their response.

Section 2: Written Paper

Part A

Many students showed thorough understanding of essay structure, responded effectively to the stimulus material, and were generally able to achieve the required length. The purpose of the written response is not to have prior knowledge, but for students to read, comprehend, and use the information given when writing their response. As the main ideas in the texts were not complex, students were expected to show their skill by establishing links between ideas and constructing convincing arguments.

It was pleasing to note that, in general, essays were logically developed, cohesive, and well-synthesised. The less successful essays tended to be formulaic. Successful introductions presented general background information, a brief preview of the argument (thesis), followed by the stance taken. Unfortunately the less successful responses tried to argue from both sides and did not identify a clear stance. In some instances the introductions were unwieldy and unrelated to the topic, and included irrelevant information or used examples and explanations that should be avoided in any introduction. ‘Hence’ and ‘therefore’ were often used inappropriately in the introduction.

In essay writing students need to synthesise and summarise or paraphrase the information – a task that some students still find challenging. Many responses were cleverly ‘transposed’ from the text, with the structure giving the impression that the essay was well-constructed. However, these essays tended to be overly long and the content, at times, irrelevant. Many students ‘collected’ information, which was then inserted under a ‘possibly’ relevant topic sentence. In many cases there was no effort to organise this information in a coherent way in order to make a convincing argument. It is important that students demonstrate discrimination when selecting the information that is appropriate for inclusion. If students argued from only one text at a time then they had difficulty in successfully developing their argument and convincing the reader. The more successful students were able to work across the texts and develop a sound argument.

Topic sentences should be original and not copied directly from a text. By being original students are able to show their understanding, and demonstrate proficiency in writing. Less successful students did not have clear topic sentences, and were therefore unable to present a well-structured response. With only one idea in a paragraph their answer could not show logical progression or structure. An important part of the essay is the use of 'connectives' to introduce each paragraph and herald new ideas. Students who were able to use appropriate connectives maintained the cohesion/stance of their essay, and conveyed accurate understanding of the issue. 'On the other hand' was used by some students when the correct term should have been 'as well as'. This is an area that requires particular attention.

In the body of the essay students became too reliant on the language used in the articles (without necessarily copying it word for word), and therefore did not demonstrate their ability to paraphrase correctly. Quite often there was not enough evidence to show how the information given was part of the student's argument. The question linked modern technologies and effectiveness of communication. It was not asking about the benefits of these technologies or whether the technologies had provided benefit to mankind or to the economy. The most successful students kept in mind that they were arguing a position, and related their information to that position.

Many students used formal language with success, but there was quite a bit of personalisation (e.g. 'I strongly believe'), and some informal 'spoken' language as if students were preparing an oral presentation (e.g. 'What would you guys think if ...'). Other weaknesses were: the use of contractions, and a range of colloquialisms such as 'in a nutshell', 'in short', 'in brief', 'to wrap things up', 'to start off', 'at the end of the day', and 'moving on'. If there are examples of informal or colloquial language in the texts (especially the personal comments) students need to understand the academic conventions of the writing task and change such terms into more appropriate formal language. This is a test of students' ability to be discerning and to paraphrase appropriately.

Generally appropriate in-text referencing was included, (i.e. only the author's surname and year of publication); however there were several examples of very long, intrusive referencing styles, for example including the whole headline of the article or putting the surname/text in brackets when it was part of the sentence. It is not necessary to include a reference after every sentence; in some cases each piece of supporting information was written into the paragraph, and then referenced, making one reference per sentence. References should be restricted to significant ideas. Conversely, referencing does not justify students writing out whole sections from the texts.

Well-constructed conclusions concisely summarised points raised, made a final comment, maintained a neutral tenor, and avoided raising new points. Less successful conclusions repeated phrases used earlier, or made sweeping judgments, and often displayed little attempt to draw the whole essay together; this gave the impression that the conclusion was rushed.

Part B

The letters were generally well written. Question 9 was more popular than question 10. Most students showed an understanding of the stimulus material, and were able to relate this to their writing. In question 9 the appropriate formalities were correctly written, and the majority of successful letters addressed the chosen text and confidently referred to the stimulus; they stated a clear purpose at the beginning, and ideas were developed logically. Letters were less successful when students spent too long on introducing themselves and why they were writing. A specific or general response to the text was needed, before writing further paragraphs.

The more successful responses were able to formulate topic sentences and group the reasons/support details into logical paragraphs. Less successful responses did not meet the word limit so could not develop ideas or depth of discussion. Students should avoid topics about which they have little knowledge, because this would also limit their vocabulary. Many letters lacked a sense of authenticity and internal consistency when written on an unrelated topic. Some responses seemed pre-prepared. Students are reminded that the main point in the letter needs to be drawn from the main point from the text/image. Many students had learned specific terms and used them even if they did not suit the rest of the letter, for example, 'civic minded', 'pivotal role', 'indubitably', 'beefed up', 'voice my opinions', and 'inculcate their minds and souls'.

Generally question 9 was well answered. Most students identified with, and attempted to elaborate on the issues. Many students created a persona for themselves as 'the writer', although mostly they took on the role of 'outraged adults'. Infrequently the writer was a person of importance.

There were very few responses to question 10. The more successful answers dealt well with the issue of advertising. However, there were a few responses that were obscure and not related to the visual image. There were also some long and incoherent responses.

Students are encouraged to be more precise in their responses. The most successful responses did not repeat the information from the prompt verbatim.

Students are most successful when:

- the purpose of the writing is clear
- the language is formal rather than informal
- paragraphs in the body of the letter are not numbered
- anecdotal evidence is avoided.

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